

The Memory

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When she woke up on Earth, she told herself that she would find Shadow - no matter what it took. But fifty years later, the person she finds is not the one she remembers. As Shadow turns against their dreams, she can do nothing but watch the chaos unfold. After all, how can a dead person change the world?

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Wonderland

A/N:

Welcome back. I'm glad to finally be continuing this series. I actually wrote this chapter over a year ago, but I wasn't ready to commit, so I didn't post it yet. Then I ended up focusing on another story and... yeah.

Just a note: While I'm taking quite a few liberties with SA2's plot, I'm not terribly familiar with Sonic lore and characters. I've done a lot of wiki reading, but I haven't... actually played most games. So if I mess something up, feel free to correct me. It might be intentional, but I still appreciate it.

Anyway, enough rambling. I can't promise the same weekly upload schedule this time, but this story has my focus. No 200,000-word distractions this time. :P I hope you enjoy the sequel to The Promise.

Echoes of Eternity: Part 2

Wake.

In my dreams I see other worlds, realities that are sometimes long past and sometimes yet to be. I sleep in death, drifting beyond the pale, but always I wake into nightmare.

My body is gone, shattered, torn into pieces by the force of my grief, chained to this horrible, agonizing almost-life. And I wish it could just end. That I would fall into the darkness, erased. But something keeps me anchored here. Tethered to this world, shackled to the Earth I once loved.

... Shadow. The only friend I have left. Where are you?

Always, I hear the distant whirling of wind, feel the tiny bites of snowflakes landing on my skin. It calls me back, begs me to let it go, just sleep. I'm lost in the middle, torn between sweet relief and this haunting feeling of almost being alive. And our dream I can't let go.

Wandering forever, walking side-by-side with myself; two different journeys, two roads that lead nowhere. One covered in impassable snow, and one blocked by earthly walls that stretch on forever and can never be broken. At any time, I could turn away and run to the darkness. It'd be easier, really, than holding on.

But I can't. I can't give up. They... they took him away. I don't know what I can do in this state... But... What if he needs me?

He never abandoned me, not once. Until the very end, Shadow refused to leave me behind! He would have escaped safely if he had. I would have died on the ARK no matter what. But he didn't, and because of me he couldn't even escape. So I have to stay.

Shadow... Wherever you are... I promise, even if it takes me an eternity, I will find you.

Shock, so cold, flooding her icy veins, chilling her still heart.

For one beautiful moment, he still stood, reaching out for the girl who couldn't save him. She watched the blood trickling down his faded lab coat, and she wondered if her grandfather would stand, defiant, scoffing at their attempt to silence him. And then his frost-coloured eyes, so like her own, went blank as he fell. A cloud of dust kicked up from his corpse and settled over the soldiers who had murdered him. And that was the last of the ARK's survivors. All but one.

That feeling, the numbness seeping into her ethereal bones, never went away.

And it was accompanied by... something new. A bitterness that sweet, kind Maria thought she would never feel. Even after they

snatched her life away from her and imprisoned her only friend, she had taken it in stride. As she drew her last breath on the ARK, felt the life seeping out of her, she'd smiled and forgiven G.U.N. for everything.

But *this* .

Maria looked down numbly at her hands. They were shaking. He... He had never even let her touch a gun. He hated them, despised them. They ended lives. They hurt people. They had stolen his son and his granddaughter away. And after all the injustices those terrible objects had inflicted on him, her grandfather had been mowed down by the very weapon that had taken everything.

Distantly, she heard the gleeful screams of the crowd, their smiling faces lit by violent daylight. They wanted blood. It mixed with the dust and seeped into the earth, the vicious sacrifice they'd needed to maintain the illusion of safety. An example to anyone who thought of crossing G.U.N.

But though anger coursed through her, she realized then, standing in a hollow, formless body, that she could do nothing. Not to the soldiers who had killed him; not to the people who had orchestrated the raid on the ARK; not even to the crowd who celebrated the gruesome execution of her kind grandfather.

She was unable to do anything but watch as they carried his corpse away, until he disappeared. Until his body was buried in an unmarked grave, reserved only for criminals. Until he was only a memory.

Gerald Robotnik was not the best person. No, he had done many cruel things, terrible things that couldn't be excused. He was, perhaps, not even a *good* person at all. But no matter what he had done, he never once had his own interests in mind. Until the very end, he thought only of his granddaughter who he'd loved. He had never wanted anything but for her to live.

Two souls, both of their dreams thrown away.

There was nothing left in this world for Maria. Nothing but a fading memory of someone who had once been her friend. And yet, she lingered, not knowing why. So, searching for that one last sliver of a dream she had left, she wandered.

The years slipped by. She counted them by the Christmas trees they erected in city centers, golden leaves that flew past and turned, soon, to snow, rain that cooled the sun-drenched towns and turned the streets to little rivers. She remembered telling Shadow about seasons, spending hours reading about them. And now they bloomed around her: rain and snow that fell through her body, the hot summer and crisp autumn air she couldn't breathe. A beautiful world that was just out of her grasp. Years that went steadily on without her.

And her wounds, slowly, began to heal. Her anger turned into bitterness, bitterness into a grudging forgiveness, a hole that would never close up. Even after all that time, she still felt shock at everything G.U.N. had taken away from her. Maria's spirit had been torn apart by her death, and though bits of her were beginning to return, she would never be able to put herself back together.

She never regained her hope. Shadow was gone, lost somewhere in this world - if he was still alive at all. She couldn't harbour more than the smallest belief that she may ever find him. And even if she did... Then what? She hadn't done anything for him when she was alive. What could she possibly do for him in this useless form?

What if he couldn't see her?

There were others. People like her. They looked normal, and yet, she was able to spot them in an instant. The way people walked around them but never exchanged glances; they lacked any sort of physical connection to the world. A thin rope tethering them to reality was all they had, and she could sense that mutual irresoluteness of spirit.

But they only exchanged glances, a nod to acknowledge the other. Sometimes they stared, some with curiosity, others pity. But always, they eventually turned away and continued walking. They had their own reasons for staying, their own problems to take care of, and Maria knew she was on her own now.

She looked for them, of course. Among those spirits, she had never seen Grandfather or Rei. But, at least, she had also never seen Shadow.

As for the living... She had wondered. Occasionally, it seemed as if people had glanced at her or shuffled out of her way. And there was that soldier. The man who had hesitated, the only one not to assist in the murder of her Grandfather. But if living humans could see her, it was incredibly rare. And there was no guarantee that Shadow would be able to.

At any time, she knew, she could simply give up. Fade away, into eternal sleep, peace. And every day she wandered, every sleepless night that passed, the call only got stronger. And yet, she couldn't let go. She just couldn't. So she carried on, lifeless, drifting. It was all she could do.

Another day. Another place.

The clear, perfect sky hung above the city Maria had wandered into. Sunbeams reflected off shiny glass windows that plated skyscrapers like armour, and people squinted as they bustled through the square. She had been to this city before, years ago perhaps, but it hadn't been so densely packed with people.

Even after years of wandering, Maria couldn't help but gaze around in wonder at the bright city lights, the ebb and flow of people as they passed by. She had never seen so many in one place. On the ARK, there had only ever been a handful of people in the same room as her. Now, they flooded the massive city, flowing out of buildings and swarming the sidewalks.

And the houses, too. She had never managed to get into one, blocked just as much by walls and doors as anyone else. But, peeking through the windows, she was surprised to see people living in multiple rooms, with all sorts of luxuries she couldn't identify. Somehow, she had always imagined houses as single bedrooms, just like on the ARK.

Everything was so... different here. Everyone ignored each other instead of exchanging amiable greetings. Their clothing was vividly bright and colourful enough to make Maria dizzy. They stopped at square booths to speak to others through a strange object, like the coms people on the ARK had used to communicate, or the device the pilots had announced messages with.

And it was so wide and open. Instead of close ceilings and closer walls, wrapped tightly by a blanket of stars, there was nothing to cage this world in but the distant, endless sky. It almost scared her, to turn and see miles of empty space instead of a wall a few feet away.

Maria had always felt infinitesimal. Project Shadow had been bigger than her; she'd known that. Though the events she had experienced in her short lifetime were extraordinary... Hidden among so many people, lost in this massive world, she felt so incredibly insignificant. She was the protagonist of her own story, her journey to find Shadow. And yet, that was only one quest out of millions.

Dazzled by the crowds and the blinding lights, the girl managed to stumble to a bus stop bench. Maria watched the people go by as she took a minute to collect her thoughts. She knew that a G.U.N. facility wouldn't have a neon sign plastered on it, so she kept an eye out for the obvious: a soldier with an assault rifle, a mysterious man dressed in all black.

But rarely did she see someone who fit that description. And even when she did follow them, they only led her to public military bases and facilities in the cities - not somewhere a top-secret experiment would be interred. She'd been too distraught to even think of

following the soldiers who executed her grandfather. So she was left with no leads at all.

Maria sighed, staring at the completely normal people who ambled by, and let her thoughts wander. Even after years on Earth, it was hard to get used to the strangeness of the humans here. On the ARK, they had all been either young, smart-looking types, or wizened old men who still had some spark in their eyes.

Here she saw children skipping gaily by, old women hobbling past on canes, skinny teenagers with lithe bodies, people with red skin scorched by the sun, muscular men, thin people, fat people, oddly short or tall people, people with every shade of skin imaginable. Not to mention the occasional Faunas, fur and feathers of all colours brightening up the landscape. Everyone was so... different.

Maria smiled to herself as a young boy streaked past, followed closely by his frazzled mother. His wispy light blond hair reminded her of Abraham's white locks.

Her smile faded as she remembered the hole they'd left in his mother's forehead. Abraham had been there, but when the soldiers had chased her, that was the last Maria had seen of him. What had become of that boy? Surely... surely they hadn't killed him too, right? He had nothing to do with Shadow. Nothing.

Well, there was no telling. Through glass windows stacked with TVs she had watched the news broadcasts, but they had said nothing about her, Shadow, or Abraham. Only vague descriptions of a biological weapon, reports condemning the scientists who had revolted and murdered soldiers. Their intent, they said, was to use this "weapon" to attack the United Federation. All lies. So until she could get to G.U.N. records somehow, she could never know the truth.

The boy's mother, having caught her runaway child, set him down right beside Maria. Luckily, no one had ever sat on her or ran into her, and they didn't seem to notice whenever she touched them. It

was as if she was emitting some sort of aura, something that kept people far away.

"Now, Christian," the mother said, tying a leash attached to the boy's backpack tightly around the bench, "Mommy needs to go inside. I'll be right back, okay? Stay right here."

The child wasn't listening, though. He was staring dreamily off into space, even once his mother walked off with an exasperated look on her face.

"Hey, what's your name?"

Maria blinked and turned to the boy, recoiling as she saw his eyes locked on her. He was looking at her with a clarity she hadn't seen directed at her in a long time. "Um... A-are you talking to me?" the girl stuttered, surprised at the sound of her own voice. How long had it been since she'd been spoken to?

The boy flashed a toothy grin, his brown eyes lighting up. "Who else would I be talking to, silly?" He poked her arm with a pudgy finger, a gesture Maria couldn't feel. "I'm Christian. I'm five years old."

"Maria. Tw-twelve." She stumbled over the age, unsure of how old she really was. She could have been twenty, and she still would have felt like the same child inside, never having truly grown up.

The young girl surveyed the child for a moment, and though she was hesitant, her curiosity got the best of her. "Why are you on a leash?"

Christian tugged at the harness around his chest. "My mommy put me in this 'cause I crossed the road wrong. She said I was gonna be the death of her. Can you get it off?" Maria shook her head quickly, looking down. "Why not?" the boy pressed.

"Because..." She blinked and furrowed her brows. How could she just say bluntly that she was dead? "Because I'm not real."

The child frowned and poked her again. "How can you not be real?"

"I can't feel that. I'm just not."

At that moment the boy's mother swept out of the shop, bags in hand. Relieved at seeing her child safe and sound, she marched over and quickly untied him. "Come on, Christian, let's go."

The boy grabbed Maria's hand abruptly, startling her as he pulled her up from the bench. "Mommy, meet my new friend. Her name is Maria and she's twelve years old."

The mother only gave a dismissive glance in Maria's direction, shaking her head. In her vision, her child's hand still hung by his side and nothing but air stood beside him. "That's nice, sweetie. Say goodbye to Maria."

The child refused to let go. So Maria, reeling from the odd feeling of a living person interacting with her, was forced to follow. Hunched over slightly as she was dragged along, the girl wasn't sure how to feel about this. A part of her was apprehensive, but another felt... relieved. Relief at finally being noticed, even by a child who couldn't help her.

What do I have to be scared of anymore? Maria thought. She couldn't die; there was no reason to be afraid of anything ever again. So she let her fear slip away as she trudged towards her new life.

It wasn't long before the trio reached what Maria presumed to be their house. It was a nice little two-story suburban place, flanked on either side by identical houses. The simple, idyllic life that Maria had once dreamed of.

Christian's mother burst through the entryway and dropped the groceries on the counter, slamming the door with her foot as claws clicked on the floor. Maria found herself rather suddenly confronted by a huge brown beast, snarling and screaming at her.

"Bandit!" the mother yelled, whipping around. "Outside!"

Maria blinked, realizing it was a dog. She'd seen pictures of the fuzzy, cute creatures, but none like this. He was black and brown with a thick skull and short muzzle, but his eyes were piercing bright blue. Those eyes bored into her as the dog continued barking savagely, ignoring his owner.

Christian's mother huffed and grabbed the dog by its scruff, nonchalantly hauling the massive creature out the sliding glass door and into the backyard. Even once penned outside, Bandit continued to bark, whining and scratching at the glass.

"What has gotten into that dog..." Christian's mother muttered while shoving food into the pantry. After stepping around her son as he stood in the middle of the kitchen staring at Maria, head tilted slightly, she sighed heavily.

"Sweetie, why don't you go play outside with Bandit?" She picked up the little boy and placed him beside the whining dog. Maria, not sure what else to do, ducked under the woman's arm and slipped through the door as it slid closed.

Bandit immediately ran his nose into her ankle, taking one deep sniff, and then another. Maria took a deep breath, reminding herself that she had nothing to be afraid of, even from this frightening creature. Perplexed about the lack of scent coming off this human, the dog whined and stepped back.

The backyard was a small, fenced area, lined smartly with flowers of various muted colours. Toys and playsets littered the yard, the only thing out of order in this neat garden. Not even a blade of grass dared to grow too tall. The boy took Maria's hand and led her to a shady area near the fence, collapsing under a droopy tree.

For a few minutes, the two sat quietly. Christian stared, head still tilted with that same confused look on his face, as Maria sat primly. Finally, slowly, he reached out and poked her arm once more.

Maria didn't turn. "Why do you keep doing that?"

"Why can't Mommy see you? But I can? And Bandit?" The aforementioned dog, with a glare at Maria, settled his gargantuan head in Christian's lap and gave a rumbling sigh.

Maria, staring at the perfect blue sky, closed her eyes. "I told you. I'm not real."

"If that was true then you wouldn't feel like that." The boy crossed his arms, sticking out his lip in a resolute pout.

Curious, the girl looked back. "Like... what?"

"Warm," Christian said matter-of-factly.

Maria blinked. How could that be true, that the spirit of a cold, lifeless corpse would emit any sort of warmth?

"Anyway," the child continued with a grin, "that means that we can be best friends, because I'm the only one who knows about you."

What a happy dream, having someone to talk to again. But she'd stopped bothering to dream a long time ago. "I can't stay. I'm looking for my friend."

"Where is he?" Christian inquired.

"I..." Maria hesitated, then sighed. "I don't know."

"What's he look like?"

Even after all these years, Shadow was still burned into her mind. They all were. Faces with picture-perfect clarity surfaced in her memories: The flecks of brown and gold in Rei's dirty green eyes. Creases in her grandfather's brow from years of worry, a few strands of black in his greying hair. And Shadow's perfect construction, not a single feature asymmetrical or disproportionate, nor any small physical flaw that most people were prone to.

But things like that wouldn't mean much to a five-year-old. "He's a black hedgehog. A bit taller than most of them, I think. Red eyes, red and white patterns on his fur, like this." Maria traced on her arms where the stripes of crimson fur ran up. "But..." She smiled to herself, remembering the kid's few years. "I doubt you've ever met him."

Christian pondered for a moment. "My daddy was talking about a black hedgehog at work... Oh, and there's one in my class too!" The boy beamed, but his smile suddenly fell. "But he's green. So it's probably not him."

"Wait, wait," Maria stuttered. "What was that about...?"

"Christian! Dinner's ready!" The sliding door slammed shut and Maria saw Christian's mom disappear into another room, her sunflower-coloured skirt trailing behind her.

The little boy hopped up, grabbing Maria and dragging her to her feet. "C'mon, let's go eat!"

Probably nothing, Maria thought. But she resolved to ask later about Christian's father. For now, she just had to worry about staying on her feet.

The family was seated around the dinner table, joined finally by Christian's father. Awkwardly, at Christian's urgings, Maria had wiggled into an empty seat too close to the table. Not yet understanding her inability to interact with the world, the little boy had given her a weird look for not pulling the chair out, but said nothing.

"Mommy," Christian whined as his mother placed plates around the table, "You have to make one for Maria too."

"Maria?" the woman asked absently, sitting down. "Is that one of your little friends, sweetie? You should have told us if you invited

someone over."

Christian huffed dramatically and crossed his arms. "No, she's right here, see?" Maria looked sadly down at the table. Christian would probably never understand.

"Oh," the mother said, staring blankly, until her eyes lit up. "Ah, *Maria*."

The aforementioned girl would come to hate that stilted tone they used when talking about her.

"Maria?" the boy's father asked blankly, and Maria heard a whisper of *"imaginary friend"* .

Ah. That made sense, she realized. As far as she knew, that was a common thing, a curiosity of Earthen children she had never really understood. Even in her lonely childhood, she'd never had one, and as far as she knew, neither had Abraham. But, she supposed, the ARK hadn't any ghosts then.

"Don't worry, Christian," Maria whispered to her friend. "I can't - don't need to eat."

He didn't appear to understand, his brown eyes wide and confused, but he shrugged. "Never mind. She says she's not hungry."

She was. Not exactly a normal, human hunger. But she missed food. She missed the rare sweetness of fruits they occasionally brought onto the ARK, the rich and wholesome taste of meat, or even the tasteless freeze-dried stuff they mostly ate. She missed feeling full. She missed feeling hungry. She even missed the feeling of those last few days, when starvation had torn her delicate stomach to shreds.

Come to think of it, she missed feeling.

She did her best not to hope for something that could never happen, so she didn't think about it that much. But, before she could stop it,

an old quote popped into her head from her days reading *Alice* :
"Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Maria looked over at Christian, and she almost laughed. Maybe, here in Wonderland, she could believe in impossible things. If only for a little while.

"This is my room. See? I've got lots and lots of toys." Christian picked up an extremely detailed model train from an expensive-looking set. "That's because my daddy works at the best job in the world."

That piqued Maria's interest. "Christian... What does your dad work as?"

Bandit, jumping onto Christian's bed, curled up and yawned. He looked at the spirit with one distrustful eye for a moment, but feeling a bit more comfortable around this strange not-human that smelled like sunshine, closed his eyes.

"Umm..." The little boy looked up from his trains. "Some big 'orgizashun'. The biggest one ever!" He beamed. "You wanna play with my trains?"

"Can't pick things up," Maria mumbled, but she sat down beside him. Thinking, she tried another approach. "Remember the black hedgehog? Can you tell me about him?"

The boy gave a wary glance at the open door that led into the upper floor's hallway. "I'm not supposed to know," he whispered. "I listen in the hallway. They said he's a wrong 'ecksperimint'. And they made him go to sleep."

Maria's eyes widened. That had to be him. A black hedgehog who was an experiment, held by a big organization? Who *e*/se could that

be? Her excitement, though, soon turned to dread. If G.U.N. had him... Did they...?

He can't be dead, she thought. Wouldn't she know? Every time she closed her eyes, she felt him far away. Calling, searching. Drawn to each other's existence, but blocked by a maze of walls that went up for infinity. She felt the same tug from the other spirits who wandered nearby, but this was different, like he was on a different plane of life.

"I have this too..." Christian ran to close his door, then crawled under his bed and emerged with a small box.

As he opened it, she was reminded of the objects she had sometimes snatched from Grandfather. Small trinkets, pictures, papers. The boy pulled out a photograph and Maria stilled.

It was him. Suspended in a small glass tube, eyes closed as he slept. He looked just the same as he always had. Even after all these years, he hadn't changed a bit. She realized then that she, too, had not changed with the years. Both of them were lost in time.

"That's Shadow," Maria whispered.

Christian turned the picture towards him, tilting his head. "He looks scary."

Maria laughed, wiping away tears, the only thing left that made her feel human. "I thought so too." She leaned back onto the bed, resting her head next to Bandit's sleeping form. "I thought that for a long time. But he was one of my only friends. He shouldn't have bothered himself with a kid like me, but... Shadow, he wouldn't..."

Maria realized that Christian was staring with perplexity on his innocent face, so she laughed. "Never mind." Her expression turned serious. "Do you know where your dad goes to when he works?"

The child shook his head, and Maria nodded, understanding. She fell onto her stomach with a sigh, staring at the picture of Shadow.

"Christian... Do you want to help me find him?"

The boy looked down. "You'll leave."

Maria shook her head and smiled. "I wouldn't abandon a friend so easily. Someday..." She sat up. "I will have to go to find Shadow. But for now, I'll stay here and be your friend. Even if you don't want to help. Okay?"

Christian looked at the photo of Shadow, tracing it with a pudgy finger. "Promise?" he asked solemnly.

Maria stuck out a finger, grinning childishly. "Pinkie promise."

Christian nodded and finally smiled. "I'll help you find your friend, Maria."

Giggling, they crossed fingers.

At first, Christian's parents played along.

They soon grew tired of "Maria this, Maria that", but they attributed it to a simple phase in their son that would soon blow over.

It didn't.

Christian refused to accept that no one else could see Maria. Some children got away with their imaginary friends, because they kept it to themselves. But he would tell anybody who cared to listen. It almost made Maria sad to hear him talking about her as if she was real, alive.

They didn't learn anything new about Christian's father or where he worked. Maria could easily eavesdrop, but their conversations were rarely helpful. They never spoke about Shadow, where Christian's father went to work, or anything that could help her at all. Christian

went through his parents' closets whenever he had the chance, but he too found nothing.

Suddenly, the years that had once crawled agonizingly on slipped by like water. Three years intermingled with games, whispered stories told at night, and the growing concern of Christian's parents as he shut himself in his room every day after school.

Christian was eight.

They began taking him to therapy. Maria wasn't sure if she should have gone, but, well, she couldn't really pull away as he dragged her into the car.

He sat in the back, fuming, arms crossed. The car was uncomfortably silent for the half-hour drive, until, finally, they reached the blinding white building. Garish letters marred its front, spelling "Children's Mental Health Center" in cheerful technicolours that made him want to throw up.

Christian's mother turned the car off and sat there for a moment, staring at her knees. Her husband gazed out the window, expression unreadable.

"We just want the best for you," she said softly.

"If you want the best for me," Christian growled, not looking at her, "you'll leave us alone."

Leave them alone, though, they did not. Soon, the young boy and his companion were sitting in a too-soft chair in a stuffy waiting room, as Christian pointedly ignored the toys and blocks stacked enticingly on a table in the middle. His mother only grew more and more agitated at her son's apathy, and she may have snapped had the assistant not appeared and ushered the family into a cramped room.

The psychologist was a young woman with a sympathetic face, but all the kindness in the world could not have melted Christian's defiant heart. He sat on the couch, pressing against the edge furthest away from his parents. Maria uncomfortably sat between them.

"So, Christian," the therapist said, just a bit too cheerily, "what's the problem today?"

The boy turned his dark eyes on that woman, and, suddenly seeming much older than his years, said in a monotone voice, "My parents think I'm insane. They want to drug me lock me away in an asylum."

And outburst ensued then, as Christian's frazzled mother went into a tizzy and the psychologist tried to calm her down. Finally, once order had been restored, the woman turned back to Christian and said calmly, "Your parents don't want to lock you away... They're just worried about you, and - " that much hated phrase, " - they only want the best for you."

But it was too late, for the boy had already tuned them out, refusing to listen to the adults talk about him as if there was something wrong with him, right in front of him no less. He did not respond to any attempts at therapy, nor to any questions.

When he went home, he went in his room and locked the door. And immediately, he was back to his old self, talking and laughing as he played with his toys, as his mother banged on the door and cried.

Maria saw in him something familiar, something she had once done. If horrible things happen to you when you're young, you lock it away. You pretend, just like it's a game, that everything is okay. Keep smiling, keep playing, and life goes on. Until you can't run anymore. Either you face your fear or it comes to you.

Maria wasn't a child anymore; not in age, at least. But she was afraid, so she pretended too.

His parents began to get desperate, so they brought back pills.

"Don't take them," Maria whispered. She remembered the early trials they had run on her as they were trying to stabilize the N.I.D.S. pills, the child their only test subject. She had been sick, throwing up. She'd forgotten herself, weeks of memory wiped from her mind. Finally, they made a pill without side effects. But she was wary of what this medicine would do to her friend.

So Christian stuck them under his tongue then spat them into the toilet when his parents had left. But it didn't take them long to find out, and soon they were grappling him and forcing it down his throat, telling him as he lay choking on the ground that they only wanted the best for him.

Even once he lay reeling on his bed, retching and twitching, unable to see or stand, they only wanted the best for him. That's why they locked the door behind them.

Maria tried to comfort him like she always had when he was sick. His mother was squeamish, but Maria could of course never get ill. She'd always sit next to him and hold his hand, telling him the stories she had once told Abraham.

But she realized, as she sat next to him on the bed with her fingers stroking his wispy hair, whispering tales about Alice and the Mad Hatter, that his eyes were blind.

"Christian?" she asked hoarsely. She touched his hand, and his fingers twitched, but he didn't respond.

He was looking through her.

Christian was ten.

Christian went back to school. He invited friends over, and had sleepovers, and played outside with Bandit. He became a model student and, in all respects, had a healthy and normal childhood.

Maria, always, hovered around him. She still whispered stories to him at night, and sat on the bed to watch him play with his toys.

But he stopped talking back, or smiling at her, or seeing her at all. She realized how much the living took it for granted, another person being able to look at you with that familiar light in their eyes. Or the ability to have a conversation, to talk about nothing at all.

It was Rei all over again. It was Shadow. But at least then, they had been gone, dead or out of sight. She didn't have to think about it; she could carry on, try to be something like happy. But now, he danced before her, taunting, teasing. He was all she had on Earth. Her only chance of finding Shadow. Her friend. But though he stood before her, he was gone, like everyone she had ever known.

The years slipped away. Sometimes she wondered if he even remembered his old friend, the little dead girl. Sometimes she wondered if she should throw away what little lead she had and look for Shadow herself. And sometimes she wondered what the point in any of this was, if she should just leave behind everyone who had forgotten her. If it was time to give up her spirit body and go to sleep forever.

She didn't know. So she watched the years, again, pass by.

Christian was twenty.

Maria lay on Christian's bed, staring blankly up at the ceiling as she usually did. She didn't move from this spot very often. The emptiness she felt was crushing, and it tethered her to the ground like a weight strapped to her ethereal limbs.

Around her, the room had changed. The toys went into the closet. The clothes had been picked up off the floor. A neat and unremarkable room, for a neat and unremarkable person. A person who had never been friends with a ghost.

Her head fell to the side as Christian entered, shutting the door softly behind him. His normally cheerful personality was now muted and solemn. The girl sat up, interest piqued, as the man crouched down next to the bed and pulled out the worn cardboard box.

Maria's mind raced. *Why?* she thought. *Shadow*, a part of her mind whispered. And, most exciting of all the thoughts, *Maybe he remembers.*

Gingerly, Christian pulled out the pictures of Shadow and spread them before him. He traced the hedgehog's dark form curiously, brow furrowed.

"Why are you thinking about Shadow?" Maria asked softly, not expecting an answer.

To her surprise, the man looked up suddenly, with a clarity in his eyes Maria thought she'd never see again. He blinked hard, then scooted back along the carpet. "Maria," he whispered, tilting his head in confusion. "You're back."

Thrown, Maria wasn't sure how to reply. Finally, she managed to choke, "I never left."

Christian slowly stood and stumbled towards the door, pinching his forehead. "I... I need to get back on those meds, I think."

"You said you'd never believe them." Christian stiffened, clutching the doorknob. "You said you wouldn't let them make you think I wasn't real."

Slowly, he dropped his arm and turned around, eyes boring holes into her. "What *are* you?"

"Not a disease," Maria said seriously. "I'm not just your imagination. I'm real."

"You always said the opposite."

The child looked away, guilty. "I didn't want you to know the truth."

He stood silently at the door, staring at her. Finally, Christian took a few steps forward and sat back down. A few moments passed as they stared at each other, neither wanting to speak first. Finally, he shook his head and whispered, "Why did you come here?"

Maria pointed at the pictures. "Shadow. I need to find Shadow." That was the goal, the only thing still driving her on.

"And then...?"

Maria looked away. She didn't know what she would do if she even got that far, and she tried not to think about it.

Christian stared at the pictures of the hedgehog, suspended, sleeping. "Why?"

The young girl wilted. The question that had always haunted her. "When someone refuses to abandon you to the very end, when they won't go even to save themselves, you can't just leave them behind. Shadow didn't make it out because of me." She locked eyes with him. "So even if there's nothing I can do to help him, I have to find him."

Christian stared at her, a regretful understanding in his eyes. "What did they *do* to you?"

Maria didn't answer.

It was quiet for a long time. Somewhere in the house, a clock was ticking softly.

Finally, Maria spoke. "You promised that you would help me."

At first he didn't move, unable to look at her, and Maria thought she might not get a response. Christian bundled up the pictures of Shadow, tied them around with a rubber band - he had to try it a few times, as his hands were shaking - and delicately put them into the box. He slid it back under the bed, out of sight, then said, "Soliraz Island. It's a remote jungle island far off the coast, where they hold political prisoners." He swallowed. "Among other things."

The light returned to Maria's eyes as he continued, "Every Friday at 8 PM, a ferry takes soldiers there. That's today. Shadow is probably contained at the deepest level within the facility."

He looked up at her. "My dad tells me everything now. He wants me to follow in his footsteps and join G.U.N. My training starts next week."

Maria stilled. "You're going to become one of them?" He nodded, and Maria's heart sank.

Slowly, the girl stood. Walking over to him, she reached up to whisper in his ear, "Don't ever trust G.U.N. Don't listen to anything they say."

And then she was gone. She left him standing there, the rays of sunlight setting his wispy blonde hair on fire, watching silently as this strange girl who had bewitched him so very long ago walked away.

Outside, Maria turned towards the coast, steeled herself, and walked. She never saw that suburban home again, and she did her best to forget about the little boy who had once lived in it. Another piece of her endless existence faded away. Like shards of glass, they glittered as they fell into the dark.

She'd never seen the ocean.

The waves flared up from the coast, trying in desperation to catch the last twinkling bits of sunlight. Having easily hopped the gap

between the ferry and the dock, Maria slipped over to the ship's bow and leaned over the railing. She glanced behind her at the soldiers in uniform who sat talking in groups, then turned her gaze to the horizon.

The strong winds tried in vain to grab at and whip her hair, but for all its efforts, it only succeeded in billowing it the very slightest. Nobody noticed that little girl leaning over the railing, her hair waving softly in the ocean breeze, staring at the setting sun with a determination unmatched by a thousand armies.

That was where she remained as the ship took to the ocean. It cut through the water, to the island of secrets that lay just over the horizon.

This was it. Beyond that lilac sky, Shadow was sleeping. She may not know what to do, or how to save him, but at least she had found him. Once he woke up, she would be by his side, just like she'd promised, whether he knew it or not. The world was working against them at every turn, but she would not let him be forgotten.

The dying light faded with a flash as the sun slipped beneath the blackened waves. And there, left in the darkness, a little girl waited.

Interim

Sorry for the amount of time this took. I didn't mean for this chapter to turn out so, um, massive. It was actually meant to have a few *more* scenes, but I saw an opportunity to end it and took it. I was also having some trouble getting into the story, but I think I'm past that now. If the quality seems different let me know. Anyway, enjoy (and hopefully the next one won't take quite as long).

I can't remember anything.

No... That isn't true. Memories swirl around me, slipping through my fingers and illuminating a still, empty world. It wasn't always just this waking, shifting darkness... was it? There was once something else. There had to be.

The colours won't stop. Gold. Blue. White. A cacophony of reminders. Like lights they dance on the edge of my vision.

Snapping my hands out, I catch one, pull it close to my chest. For just a moment, it fills up the darkness, and I see a girl.

Maria. I remember her. I promised I would bring her... No, not here. Not to this place. But somewhere; somewhere important. Her smile is the only star in my dark memories.

I reach out; another. A red memory. Life that seeps out, flows down into a puddle. Crawling forward, I gaze into it. She is red, and she is not smiling. I fall; the crimson wraps around me, turns to inky black. And I sleep. She is gone.

Why? How can this girl who once smiled die in my arms?

I gave up. Maria... I'm sorry. But after that, what could I do? I would have run from the world forever to keep you safe... But without you

by my side, what was even the point? Maybe this is best, after all. Bring hope to humanity... But what does someone like me have to give to this world?

I can hear you. Dead, but not gone. If I reach through the darkness, I can feel your soul somewhere out there. Like you're near me and yet a million miles away. If this really isn't the end, then why can't you seem to reach me? Why does this world I'm lost in stretch on for eternity?

You promised that you would find me, no matter what, right? Then...

Maria... Where are you?

"Begin log: January 12, 1964. Professor Robotnik, you have twenty minutes. Please begin the surgery."

In the eerily bright light of the operation room, surrounded by clean-cut doctors and soldiers wearing crisp uniforms, Gerald Robotnik looked out of place. His old clothes were rumpled and stained, his facial hair unkempt, his old body weary and haggard. Two years rotting in a federal prison would do that, wouldn't it?

But despite his run-down appearance, the spirit hadn't yet flickered out of his eyes, and he glared hot flames at the man who held a recording device to his lips. "I'm a scientist, not a doctor," he muttered. "Why don't you get one of these amateurs to do this for you?"

Out of the shadows beneath the empty observation deck, the Commander stepped forth. His grey hairs had only spread, and his eyes were tired, but his face held the same sneer. "Do what the doctors tell you, Robotnik. You've been stubborn enough."

Gerald crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow, clearly unintimidated. "Is this meant to break me? Forcing me to plant bombs in my own experiment?" He glanced down at Shadow, who

lay unconscious on the table before him - perhaps looking even more alien than Gerald. "It's not as if you'll ever let *him* out of stasis. So what's even the point of this?"

"You're not in any position to be asking questions here," the Commander snarled. "Just do what the damn doctors say."

Sighing, the old man picked up a scalpel, wielding it deftly. He *wasn't* a doctor, but he'd done work on Shadow and his predecessors before. Cutting into him wasn't new. "Where's the incision site?"

"A one-inch cut on the places that have been marked. One on each forearm and shoulder. The larger one in the chest," answered an ash-haired doctor, clutching a clipboard as if her life depended on it.

They want to make sure he's truly dead if he ever escapes, the man thought irately, beginning with the arm, the areas of which had already been shaved so his fur wouldn't interfere.

He wondered why they had even kept Shadow alive as he deftly cut into his creation. Blood trickled out, staining the small blade crimson. He wasn't sure how the hedgehog had been captured... The last thing he'd seen was Maria going down, and Shadow taking the soldiers with her. But regardless, why didn't they just put him down like they'd promised they would?

If their goal had been only to capture him... If they would have taken him away peacefully... Then the massacre of the ARK, his granddaughter's death, had been for nothing. And this thought left him seething.

As Gerald made the incision, Shadow flinched slightly in his sleep. A doctor stared in alarm at the Faunas' fluttering eyelids, taking a panicked step back. "He's waking up!"

Another, standing nearby, shook his head. "We've pumped in enough tranquilizers to keep him sleeping until 2000. It's just a reflex."

Just a reflex. Once he had said that, long ago. Then turned to see them staring at each other as if their souls had been intertwined.

Red eyes rolled, and his body twitched. Gerald hesitated, hopeful - but as much as he wished for Shadow to burst out of his coma and wreak havoc on all of Soliraz, the Faunas remained still on the table. Foggy eyes locked on the ceiling.

"Continue the operation," someone barked.

Gerald picked up one of the bombs. Curious, he held it to the light, examining it. It was impossibly tiny, a chip the size of his fingertip, with intricate wiring running along its surface. "Ah," he said aloud, realizing why it seemed familiar. "Dr. Bright, one of my scientists that you murdered, worked on this model."

He tilted his head, smiling as the room shifted uncomfortably. "A bit simple, don't you think? I would imagine that the greatest military force in the world would invest in something that couldn't be so easily tampered with."

"Robotnik..." The Commander growled, stepping forward. He'd had enough. They didn't have any Faunas doctors, but he'd sooner send one of the new soldiers to do it than deal with Gerald's insolence any longer. Anyway, he'd made his point.

The man went for the gun strapped to his back, preparing to escort him back to his cell, but he stopped in his tracks when the room was washed in red and an alarm began to blare. The half-dozen scientists looked about in panic, and moments later, a frazzled soldier burst through the doors.

"All of block 2-P is out!" he gasped, clutching his side and sinking to the floor.

"What?!" the Commander roared. In two strides he was there, hauling the petrified soldier to his feet. "What's the meaning of this?!"

The man shrunk down. "The gates malfunctioned, and all the cells opened. We don't know how, but that one that was experimented on - the bat - "

The whole underground facility seemed to quake as a roar ripped through the halls. Scientists poured out the door like ants, desperate to contain their experiment-gone-wrong; the Commander and his guards weren't far behind. In the panic, Gerald had been forgotten.

Only one person had been left. The doctor, clutching her clipboard with perhaps even more vigor than before, and staring at Gerald with wide terrified eyes. The man regarded her with disinterest, glanced at the equipment left lying on the table, and sighed. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he murmured.

"W-what?"

In one swift motion, the Professor grabbed the scalpel and thrust it cleanly into her throat. The woman stumbled back, reaching slowly for her chin as Gerald straightened. For a moment she stared, bewildered, as blood gushed out of the wound and down her shirt. Then she dropped.

Gerald ignored her wheezes and turned to Shadow, desperation written in his tight brows. He didn't have long. Shaking the hedgehog by the shoulders, the old man said gruffly, "Shadow."

He didn't respond, half-lidded eyes gazing motionless at the ceiling. Gripping him tighter, his creator shook him urgently. "Shadow, get up! We have to - "

Shadow's eyes drifted over, weak recognition sparking within. For a moment, Gerald's heart lifted, and the dream of escape danced through his mind. But the thundering of footsteps back down the hall sent it sinking down again.

If Shadow wouldn't wake up, there was only time for one thing.

And as the pounding drew ever closer, he went still again. His eyes drifted over the lone table, the trolley with medical equipment, the bombs dropped on their sides. He was out of options, now, and out of time. Steeling himself, the Professor grabbed the hedgehog's shoulders as the platoon of soldiers crashed into the room. A trolley sent their way gave him a few moments.

"Shadow!" Gerald cried, ignoring the shouts as they closed in on him. "You have to avenge her, no matter what it takes! Do you understand?"

The soldiers were there already, hauling the old man away from the table. He elbowed the guard's gut and stumbled forward as he was released. Gerald desperately seized the unresponsive Shadow once more. *"Avenge Maria!"*

The slight widening of his red eyes, registering the command, told the old professor all he needed to know. They slipped shut again as the doctors, yelling in panic, rushed over with sedatives. But Gerald's struggles had ceased. He allowed himself to be led, smiling, past the wide-eyed corpse of an innocent scientist, through the halls, and back into his dark, lonely cell. It didn't matter what happened to him anymore.

G.U.N. would suffer before the end. Shadow would make sure of that.

Sunlight. She had to squint as it burst merrily through the quickly widening rectangle, the distant warmth that couldn't quite touch her skin. Around her, the crowd shifted restlessly, eager to escape the depths for a few hours.

As her eyes adjusted, she took in the familiar landscape: concrete enclosed by barbed wire and steel chainlink, soldiers marching in even rows. Their steps were like music echoing off metal and stone buildings. Beyond this, the wild jungle, drenched in sunlight, always

imposing. Further still, an endless, blinding ocean. All this she had seen a hundred times before.

One deep breath as the door disappeared into the ground, then another. She didn't have lungs and couldn't feel the crisp afternoon air that she inhaled; she could hold her breath forever if she wanted to. But if she continued to breathe, she might forget for a moment that she wasn't alive.

The soldiers poured out around her, breaking formation ever so slightly as they streamed onto the grey slabs. Like dogs let out of their cages, shoving forward, giddy with freedom. She watched them a moment, standing in the darkness of the prison entrance. She thought she might turn around. Then, as the doors began to rumble shut again, she stepped out.

Usually the girl stayed inside. Watching. Wandering. A ghost guardian, waiting forever for something to change. But even she needed to see the sunlight, sometimes. For all that had happened, she was still human.

So here she was.

Maria stood in the middle of the courtyard, staring up at the sky. Blue like the ocean, cloudless and framed by peaked watchtowers. Around her people circled, oblivious, blind. So she picked a direction and walked.

And walked.

The aboveground facility on Soliraz Island was small, as most of it sprawled beneath the earth. There were sleeping quarters for some of the soldiers, a mess hall, and a recreational building. A small armoury for emergencies, lines of warehouses for supplies. And the dock sticking out into the ocean, empty but for each Friday, when bright-eyed recruits poured out of the ships and weary soldiers stepped on. Everything was enclosed by a tall wire fence. That was all.

Unless she wandered off into the looming jungle, there was nothing to see on Soliraz Island, and nothing to do. In a place where nothing changes but the faces of the soldiers.

So even once she had rounded the perimeter ten times, idly trailing her fingers through the electrified chain-link, it seemed like the sun hadn't moved at all. It hung heavy in the sky, an immobile orb of fire glaring down on the military facility.

The girl sighed, shifting restlessly and finally collapsing against the fence. She wasn't sure exactly how long she had been on this island, but it certainly *felt* like she had haunted Soliraz for much longer than she had the rest of Earth. And at least then, she'd been free to wander.

Her bored gaze drifted to the recreational building, where shadows were slinking behind paper-covered windows. They had a TV there - having known only local video feeds and occasional remote, two-way communications, this still seemed strange to her - and she'd linger when she wanted the date or found herself curious about the goings-on of Earth.

Anyway, it was more interesting than stepping over bright, changeless concrete all day.

Someone rushed through the door as she approached, so Maria was able to duck under their arm and into the moodily-lit hallway. From the far room, a droning male voice reached her, and blue lights flickered. To her right, shadows shifted and she heard the clink of the game they called "pool". She glanced in as she passed and saw a woman grinning and holding the wooden rod in the air. Another voice grumbled in protest.

"... a great August day here in Renegade City; summer's still kicking and we're going to see a rise in temperatures this week!"

Forced enthusiasm, fake smiles. There was a reason she didn't come here often.

She stepped into the gloomy room, scattered with old, dusty furniture. Two soldiers, one male and one female, sat smoking at a table in the back. Contraband, not that anyone cared. As she entered, the male glanced up and jumped.

The woman took a drag, glancing at her friend with one eyebrow raised. "Y'alright?"

"Just thought I saw something." He smiled weakly and turned back to the TV.

The things that made her wonder. And reminded her of a little boy who could see her, long ago.

"Don't turn out like Wheeler." Maria turned, curious, as the woman puffed out grey smoke. The plumes wisped towards the ceiling and scattered.

"What happened to him?"

She took another puff, just to make him wait. "Started seein' things in the facility. Things that weren't there. Men and Faunas running through the halls... Little girls that never existed." The soldier smiled grimly, and Maria's heart would have skipped if she'd had one. "Raised the alarm too many times. The story is that the commander sent him home - but they say he went somewhere *worse*. "

The man grinned and rolled his eyes, returning to his cigarette. "Load of bull if you ask me."

She snorted, almost indignant. "It's true."

Maria frowned, turning to the TV that was mounted on the wall. In all the years she'd spent in this place, almost nobody had noticed her, even for a moment. She was beginning to think that Christian was a fluke, or a figment of her tired imagination. But hearing that...

Still. Maybe that man had just lost his mind in the long, twisted hallways. There were no spirits like her here - or, at least, they didn't linger. You'd have to be absolutely mad to spend your afterlife in a place like this. This, the girl was well aware of.

Maria stared up at the TV, squinting at the small text that scrolled by. *August 23, 2012*. Fifty years since that day, long ago. She should have been sixty. She should have been long dead.

The girl glanced down at her hands. Smooth, young, and scarless. Well, that part had come true, anyway.

Images flashed by on the screen too fast for her to comprehend, the man's voice blurring into obscurity. Someone was stepping into the hall, now, and she'd gotten what she came for. So she left the two soldiers chatting quietly in that dark room. As she headed for the door, the TV voice followed her, drifting lazily into the hallway.

"... Chaos Emerald stolen from Addacan government facility... United Federation condemns Addaca's military... still searching for the perpetrator..."

She wasn't worried, so she tuned it out. Maria had seen crises behind a glass screen, countries falling and wars that swept the world. But Earth always lived on. And beneath it, Shadow slept, untouched by its calamities.

Back into the blinding sunlight, the door swinging shut behind her. The girl raised her hand to cover her eyes as she crossed the long courtyard, weaving through sturdy trucks and ATVs until she found herself facing the ocean.

Sighing, Maria leaned against the fence, linking her fingers with the wire, and gazed out over the sea that faded into a dark horizon. Boats rocked gently on the mild shores near the dock; a few soldiers scurried up and down the wood as they took care of the vessels. *Must be Friday*, she thought idly. Over them, the sun was finally thinking about descending.

The child's longing gaze turned to the gate, guarded by two soldiers, following the ramp that led down the island and curled towards the rocky shore.

What would happen if she just walked away? She'd step into the ocean 'til the water was up to her shoulders. Swim into that endless horizon. Then slowly sink to the bottom... Sleep in those dark, still depths, and never wake up.

She wanted it more than anything. Some days she'd never thought there could be something more exhausting than living - but the numbness of walking dead through a world that had rejected her, that was far worse than the pain of being alive.

And she was just so, so tired.

But as she pressed against the fence like she might meld right through, it called her back. That faint feeling, like another's existence resounding through the void, not so far away now. Maria glanced wearily back as a troop of soldiers approached the entrance to the prison bunker, and the gigantic doors began to pull themselves open, revealing a wide maw of darkness descending into Earth.

There was no giving up. Not now. Not yet. So she slipped into the crowd and followed them down the winding stairs into the heart of Soliraz.

She glanced back and saw the sunlight disappear, plunging them into a darkness lit only by eerie white wall lights.

The deeper they walked down those stairs, the more the earth around them seemed to hum as it pressed against the concrete. She was always afraid that they'd get buried, that Shadow would be lost beneath the ground forever. But the solid walls, though cracked in some places, always held.

And finally, the tight stairway ended, widening out into a long, straight hallway. Machine doors led off into other rooms, and

distantly, she could hear low chatter, the scuffling of boots, and the soft drone of technology.

Floor 1. Low security. Soldiers' quarters, eating places, training rooms, equipment and machinery. She knew it well - better than the lying TVs, she'd find a quiet corner and listen to people talking about the world, their homes, their families. It reminded her that G.U.N. wasn't just a faceless entity, consuming, taking everything. The organization was made up of humans, too.

But this wasn't where she needed to be. She'd left Shadow for too long.

So she strode quickly past the enormous mess halls, where dozens of soldiers milled about and the roar of conversation was loudest. After a few turns, the corridor shortened. Now, if she had glanced left or right, she'd have seen the dorms: soldiers slipping on jackets as they got ready for the day of patrols, women pulling back their hair into tight coils, new arrivals scrubbing furiously at scuffed metal-toed boots for inspection.

But she stared straight on, head raised and shoulders back, until she saw the little red lights and yellow-striped banners that marked the descent into the next story. The low-security prison.

Far beneath the sand and the waves, Soliraz wasn't just a place for training soldiers, but somewhere to store those who managed to really piss off the United Federation or G.U.N. People who knew just a bit too much; had committed treason, war crimes, crimes against humanity.

People like her grandfather.

She slipped in on the tail of the afternoon rotation, down the stairs again. When the ground levelled out, they were in a narrow corridor, only wide enough for them to file through two-by-two. Maria was squashed between two men, only able to see the walls on her sides as they marched on.

They reached the prison common room, where the ceiling rose up high above them. The precarious metal walkways, lining the walls, went up at least three stories. She saw the glint of bars, dark cells cut into the earth, and quickly looked away.

Though it housed the most people, Floor 2 was quiet, at least. Sometimes she'd hear a coughing fit, or a faraway moan, but otherwise, it was dead silent but for the soft murmur of voices. Even the hum of the earth pressing in seemed quieter here. If by mistake her gaze wandered into a cell, she would at least see something resembling a *person* sitting on their squat bed, reading a book, wearing a clean uniform.

This, she could not say for some parts of Soliraz.

But that was deeper into the facility. She wasn't there yet. So, for now, she kept her head down and hurried through the thin prison hallways. Down she went again to the next set of detention centers, weaving her way through the rooms she knew by heart, until she found herself standing small before Gate 4.

Maximum security.

Not for those who had committed egregious crimes, who were violent, dangerous. No, that's what Floor 3 was for. Maximum security... Well, that was only for the ones who would be forgotten.

And it was so deep beneath the earth, and so few people went there, that she had to wait quite a while for a high-ranking officer dressed in gaudy stars to come along. Next to her, a man trod along, clearly new to Soliraz if his tense shoulders said anything. The gate opened as the woman slotted in her sparkling keycard, revealing a small waiting room empty all but for an elevator.

The three of them stepped into it, huddling against the walls as the doors slid shut. Maria usually couldn't feel a thing, but her stomach always bottomed out when she felt the ground rising around her. She hadn't liked the elevators on the ARK, either.

"Ever been to Floor 4?" On the officer's face was the ghost of a smile.

His reply was terse. "No, ma'am."

"You'll get used to it."

No, thought Maria. You never really did.

The elevator doors slid open, and the three of them were immediately assaulted by the *sound*. Tortured groans seemed to rattle the underground walls, interspersed with screams and howls that chilled their blood. Clutching her arms, Maria shuddered. Judging by the wrinkling of the soldier's nose, the smell was as bad as the noise.

The officer laughed, a sharp, sudden sound that made Maria and the recruit jump. "Well, you haven't passed out yet. That's a start." She strode forward, and the two were forced to scurry quickly behind.

Though the walls and floors were made out of the same off-white concrete, reinforced steel and other strong materials barring them... The lighting somehow seemed darker, the walls dirtier, like they might peel off to reveal the packed stone and dirt underneath. Around them shadows, alive, writhed like flailing beasts.

There was no common room. No exercise area, or library, or cafeteria, or bathrooms. In maximum security, there were only some areas for the attendants - and the long, wide, dark hallways. Soon, they found the cells that lined them, evenly paired on each side. Beyond this, the rooms did not change.

There was a small slot in each door, and a window at the top for soldiers to peer in at the lowered rooms. The man did, and recoiled, quickly masking the terror on his face before the officer could turn.

Maria could have reached the window if she stood on tip-toes, but she didn't bother. She'd seen enough of the prisoners of Floor 4, with

their stringy hair and pallid skin, their wide eyes that stared like they could see her.

"Welcome to Soliraz," the woman said grimly, gesturing to the lines of cells, perfectly straight and identical except for the occasional discarded stretcher. At the end of the hall, a soldier was dragging a thrashing Faunas by her wings across the floor. Her feathers were wild, and had probably once been baby blue, years ago. The bird screeched, desperate and grating, and flailed as the man roughly pushed her into the cell. She landed with a dull thud.

The boom of the slamming door was still resounding when they continued walking. Her screams of rage followed them as they turned down the corridors.

As they walked along, the officer was explaining in an impossibly calm tone what each of the wards was for, and what sort of prisoners lived in them. Maria walked stiffly, eyes locked on the grooved metal beneath her feet. There was a reason she didn't move about the facility much. She counted the squares as she walked over them, trying to calm herself. Forty-five, forty-six...

"What about that cell? Why is it closed off like that?"

Maria stiffened and stopped. The officer's harsh laugh came again, grating. "No one uses *that* cell anymore." They walked on, leaving the girl standing there.

Trembling, she dared a glance up above the cell door. In rusty letters that had been gilded perhaps fifty years ago: Cell 46. Turning quickly, she dashed after the soldiers.

It would have been easier if she was still human, if her disgust and grief had been felt by the sting of bile in her throat, the physical sickness as her trembling body gave out. But now, she felt nothing. Her revulsion was empty and meaningless.

The two soon split off from her, heading towards other wards, but she continued quickly down the halls alone. Getting stuck here was unfortunately common, and she wasn't taking any chances. Luckily, she made it to Gate 5 just as it was closing behind some doctors, and, taking a leap, she slipped through the gap in the metal.

She didn't know what would happen if one of those doors ever shut with her half-inside it. Probably the universe would explode. She almost smiled, the weight of that terrible ward already lifted off her spirit, but instead soberly followed the scientists. They hurried down the stairs into Floor 5, a delirious prisoner propped up between them.

Maria tried not to think about what was going to happen to him.

Floor 5, the scientists' floor, was much more brightly lit. The group squinted as they stepped into it; compared to maximum security, it was like treading into another, brighter world. The walls were white and sterile, the floors cleanly scrubbed. Wide windows peered into laboratories, operation rooms, chemical storage.

As they walked, Maria stared into one room, where engineers were gathered around one of G.U.N.'s watch-drones. Its parts were spread about the table and the screen was cracked. The group passed by, and in another, she saw a bright orange liquid being injected into a woman strapped to a table. Her limbs were still, like she was unconscious, but she saw her chest heaving and knew she was awake. Then, the girl snapped her gaze to the end of the hallway.

The scientists and their prisoner disappeared into one of the rooms. Maria was alone in the glaringly bright corridors.

She didn't think there was a place she'd like less than Floor 4, but this was bad enough. Down there in the darkness for months, she'd been craving sunlight, but now she regretted it. She was always restless away from Shadow - the journey back to him could take days - and those few minutes hadn't been worth all this trouble.

Taking a breath, the girl steeled herself and continued on. That was all she could do. She just had to get to the bottom floor, the girl told herself. It was dark, and still, and quiet down there. Only a few scientists went to that place, sometimes. Usually she only heard them down the hall, bumping about as they put defective machines into storage.

But sometimes they'd bring out Shadow, so laced with sedatives that his head lolled back and he usually never woke up, into the upper floor.

Maria hated to see him like that, the one who had always been strong and fought for their survival, completely defenseless as those doctors cut into him and drew blood. Nothing more than an experiment to be tested on, like the other prisoners. But at least it was a reminder that he was still here, still alive. That someday, he might wake up.

She still dreamed of a world where he didn't have to fight anymore. Where, even if he had to run and hide forever, he could live a happy life on Earth. And she could go to sleep knowing he'd be safe.

Anyway, they hadn't brought him out in years. Even longer than that.

Of course, with Floor 6 being so rarely used, and only available to the highest-ranking scientists and soldiers, it was difficult to get down there. As she rounded the corner, she saw the hallway leading up to the gate still and quiet. She hadn't spotted any doctors with a gold keycard around their neck on her way here, either. So she would probably have a while to wait.

Sighing, the child slid down the smooth metal doors, turning her head up to the ceiling run along with sturdy bars. She was used to waiting, by now. Boredom was just her reality, and she'd entertain herself by daydreaming or trying to remember passages of *Alice*. Though she must have read it a million times in her head, filling the gaps with her own little stories until she grew tired of it, and even Wonderland brought her little joy now.

When she ran out of thoughts to think, her mind would go blank and quiet, her eyes dim and locked on something beyond mortal sight. This was the closest to sleep that she had.

And for a little while, the girl tuned out the world around her.

It could have been hours later when the piercing sound drew Maria out of her trance, shocking her back into the cold waters of reality. She scrambled to her feet as a squealing drone cut through the air, paused, and returned again with a shriek. An alarm. The halls washed in red began to disappear.

She was plunged into memories, sent falling through the void and waking up to an old reality. Slowly she looked over and saw Shadow, staring at her wide-eyed as the ARK began to bleed. For just that instant, she could feel her heart pounding, pumping blood and terror through her veins, a real body. She reached out for Shadow -

But her hand only hit the solid wall. Dazed, she looked about, seeing the familiar cement. She'd fallen down without realizing, and the girl pulled herself to her feet again.

For a few seconds, she stood completely still under the gate. Something was happening in Soliraz, for the alarms to be raised all the way on secure Floor 5. It couldn't be Shadow. No one had come through this door while she'd been sitting here. Even if he had escaped somehow, nobody would know yet.

What was happening?

Panic began to rise in her. She had to get to Shadow. If there was something going on, if intruders found their way to him, she *had* to be there. But even if she could interact with the world, it's not like she had a keycard. She was stuck here, completely powerless.

Maria leaned her head on the great, cold gate for a moment, then squared her shoulders and ran off to figure out what was going on.

She dashed down the halls of the laboratories, peering in as she passed. Behind windows scientists huddled down under tables and in corners, their eyes wide open and concerned - clearly just as clueless as she was. So she kept running.

As she glanced through one window, she saw the prisoner from before and stopped. Where his right arm had been was a bandaged stump, soaked red, next to it a metal prosthetic that hadn't yet been fitted. Heavily sedated, he could only roll weakly about, his open mouth screaming silence as it bared rotted teeth. The doctors were nowhere to be seen. Shivering, Maria turned away and continued on.

Finally, a scientist burst out of a door as she passed, taking off down the hall with his jacket trailing behind him. She managed to duck into the bright room before it shut.

Maria straightened slowly, looking about. The alarms that screamed through the halls were quieter now. There were maybe five people here, engineers judging by their cropped hair and tight clothes. The doctors all wore loose lab coats, which would be suicide when working with G.U.N.'s heavy machinery. Metal pieces lay on tables, and a few square panels with screens seemed to control the bigger machines in this room.

"Sasha," said one of the men who sat hunched under a table, "go see if you can contact the other floors."

"Why don't you do it?!" the fawn-haired woman retorted, huddling deeper under her desk. "Whatever's going on, I'm not coming out of here until the alarms stop!"

The woman who sat beside her rose, going for the panels. "I'll do it if you two will shut up."

"Are you crazy?! You'll get killed or something!" The engineer ignored her friend, green eyes darting over the panel as she poked the buttons.

After a moment, she frowned. "It's not going through to the other floors." Maria walked up behind her, peering down at the small grey screen embedded in the metal. She saw the flashing symbol in the corner that meant there was a little signal, even so far underground. "Should I SOS the military?"

"Wait a bit," another man said uncertainly. "The general will have our asses if the whole army comes down here, and it was just a prisoner breach or something."

An escaped prisoner. Of course; probably someone dangerous from maximum security managed to run for it and the alarm was protocol. Maria sighed, relaxing. Nothing to worry about. But, then, that meant Shadow's escape would have to come another day.

Just as the group was beginning to look relieved, they all jumped as the lights cut, plunging them into darkness. The emergency lights clicked on moments later, but the once-brilliant room looked eerie in the low lighting, only broken by the glowing panel buttons. Suddenly, they all missed the roar of the alarms.

They all exchanged uneasy stares, and the man under the table suggested weakly, "The - the generator must have broken down."

The words had barely left his mouth before they heard it: Pounding footsteps coming down the hall, closer and closer with every thump on the metal floor. Before anyone could move, the door slid open and a man with a gun burst in. The brown-haired woman screamed before she realized that he was dressed in a soldier's uniform, but his appearance was hardly reassuring. Even in the dim light, they could see him clutching a bloody shoulder.

"There's been a breach!" he gasped, clinging to the doorframe for dear life. The engineers all stared wide-eyed and silent, and when the soldier managed to catch his breath, he continued, "A man in a mech... Broke into Soliraz, gunned down everyone in his way... And he's heading straight for Floor 6!"

Maria stilled. She opened her mouth, but the woman who still stood by the panel spoke first. "Floor 6?" The girl finally noticed the glint of a gold keycard hanging by her chest.

The scientists all went pale at that. Even them, the engineers, had an idea of what was down there though they might not know the circumstances of its containment. Someone who had broken into a facility like this, heading straight for a top-secret experiment... A deadly weapon that, they'd been told, could wipe out humanity...

The soldier sank down, chest heaving. "We need backup... if we'll have any chance... But something's jamming the signal on every floor, and we can't..."

"We have signal!" The engineer hovered her hand over the button that would send for help from the military. The only chance of keeping the experiment contained. But she hesitated, waiting for a confirmation.

Not hearing the pounding coming down the hall, like metal colliding with metal to the pace of thundering footsteps.

The soldier opened his mouth to give the order, but the words never escaped his lips. Everyone jumped and hit the floor as machine guns ripped through the silence, the bullets wracking his body. The man shuddered for a moment then dropped.

There was a horrible crash, and seconds later, a great metal beast rounded the bend and burst through the tall door into the room. Maria's eyes traced it slowly upwards: long, metal legs that bent at the knee, allowing it to walk. A squat rotund body, deep enough to hold a person. Guns mounted on each side, some for bullets; the larger ones, she would have guessed, for rockets.

And sitting in the body, behind the slightest flicker of a forcefield, a man. Maria could barely see his face, for the machine stood far taller than she, but she caught a glimpse of a thick body frame, tinted glasses, and a burly moustache.

"Grandfa-?" she began, incredulous. But no, she knew better. She'd watched him die herself.

Before anyone could make a move, run or hide or even fight, the man went for the controls. Bullets exploded out of the mech with tiny flashes of light, peppering the hidden scientists and pinging off the metal walls. Maria, frozen in place, felt them flying through her body to hit the scientist behind her. The woman under the desk, unharmed by the initial wave of bullets, threw herself forward to make a run for it. Within moments, she fell, arms still reaching out for the door.

When the curls of smoke faded, the room was still.

Shaking, Maria turned to stare at the woman who now lay crumpled against the panel, her wide green eyes rolling up and blood seeping out of her. With her black wispy hair and snow-white skin, that empty gaze, she almost looked like Dr. Pahlke.

Do not let our deaths be in vain.

And then she was wrenched from reality and thrown among them again. Turning, she saw their ghosts looking down on her. Grandfather. Rei. Dr. Pahlke and Theo and everyone else she had failed that day. Their impassive gazes followed her as she ran. But then, as she pushed frantically through the crowd of silhouettes, she caught a glimpse of red looking back at her. Someone who wasn't supposed to be there among the dead.

"Ha! Who knew infiltrating G.U.N.'s top secret base would be so *simple*?" Maria blinked and came back to herself, still slightly disoriented. She looked up dazedly at the man who sat grinning in his mech, arms crossed.

Behind her, Maria heard a soft chirp, and the man's triumphant smile faded. She turned and saw the scientist's hand pressed firmly down on the SOS button. Her teeth were bloody as she grinned.

"Damn you - !" Another slew of bullets and the woman went down for good.

Maria skidded out of the way as the mech tramped over with no regard for her, the body of it bending and lowering to bring its pilot closer to the ground. His dark eyes darted over the letters stamped into the small screen - "Distress signal sent" - and he pinched his forehead. "Dammit."

Reaching out, he grabbed the necklace that held the woman's high-clearance keycard and unlooped it from around her neck. She didn't protest.

With his prize acquired, the mech began to raise back up again. Maria dove into it without thinking, scrambling over the edge and tumbling through the forcefield as if it wasn't there. She hadn't known that would work.

The girl had hardly managed to pull herself up in the round, cramped capsule before the machine lurched towards the exit and sent her down. Struggling with every jerky step it took, she finally managed to pull herself to her knees to get a look at the person behind all this.

As soon as she laid eyes on the man who sat beside her, she realized that there was no way this could be her grandfather. His tawny facial hair was wild and unkempt where Gerald's had been neatly combed and grey. This man was younger, his face much smoother and less set with wrinkles, though he was at least fifty. His orangey-brown hair was thin and balding.

The resemblance was uncanny - in stocky round body shape, similar angular facial features, dark glasses masking thin eyes. But she saw now that this was certainly not her grandfather.

Before she could get a better look at him, the mech staggered to the hallway and jerked into a run down the long, white halls. Each gallop sent the two into the air slightly, and Maria had to cling to the

controls for dear life, knowing that she'd go sailing straight through the forcefield if a particularly hard jolt ejected her.

As they crashed through the corridors, every step sending metallic sounds booming down the hallway, they found little resistance. Soldiers sometimes appeared, shouting, behind them. They were left in the dust. The few who managed to loop around were quickly mowed down.

Maria shut her eyes and tried not to watch, old memories threatening to resurface again. She didn't want to think about what this man would do with Shadow. Someone who killed others so easily... What could their intentions be with a creature like Shadow?

Maybe he was after something else, and this would all be for nothing. A part of her hoped for that. She didn't know what Shadow would do when he woke up.

The mech skidded to a stop, nearly sending the ghost flying out the front. Sighing, the man pulled out a small device and stared at it, poking at menus and frowning at the strange display. As the soldiers began to draw closer, he glanced back and growled, starting up the machine again.

"Need to speed this up," he muttered to himself, though his scowl soon turned to a grin. "Though if my grandfather's biological weapon is as powerful as he promised, it won't matter!"

Maria stared. *Grandfather?* She didn't have time to dwell on it - she had to hunker down as the robot took off, sprinting faster than ever.

But as she dared a glance over, she caught a glimpse of blue behind those dark glasses. A deeper azure, but still - blue like her eyes. Like Grandfather's.

Ivo. She remembered him now: her little cousin she'd only seen pictures of, so long ago. She hadn't even given him a thought,

assuming that everyone related to her was long dead. But even after all this time, she'd still had family on Earth, hadn't she?

Jayden, her father, wasn't Gerald's only child. There were two others, but besides occasional pictures and letters stashed away in the desk, she'd never seen or heard of her aunt and uncle. Or her cousin. Only now did she wonder why.

Ivo was always frowning in those pictures. Now, his face held that same displeasure.

Now, with him going after Shadow, Maria wondered what he knew about the ARK. What had they told him about her and Grandfather? He must have still been small when it happened, so what had he thought? Why was he chasing down her and Grandfather's legacy now? But the sharp line of his frown and his eyes focused only on the halls ahead told her nothing.

Having evidently worked out the device he'd been tinkering with, the two of them soon arrived at the elevator gates. Ivo backed the mech up, and rockets exploded out of it, hitting the door with glorious explosions - that, once cleared, appeared to have done very little.

Sighing, he scratched his head and examined the featureless metal, until he noticed the small slot to the right of the great doors. The mech trod forward and bent down, the forcefield disappearing for a moment so he could slot the gold keycard in. A beep, and the doors slid open.

This elevator was different, industrial, for carrying machinery through the facility. Its wide platform had low walls and could hold a crowd of people or a few large robots. She'd taken the personal elevators down, as they saw higher traffic, but no doubt he had ridden lifts just like this to get here.

Before the doors could slam shut, a few round, flying robots flitted through the gap. Black cameras gaped at them as their tiny bullets pinged uselessly off the forcefield. Ivo paid them little mind; his

attention had moved to another handheld device, different from the last with a strange slot sticking out the bottom. But he did turn the mech to casually blast the nuisances down. They bounced off the elevator and dropped into the void.

And in the silence, they waited.

Maria sat up from where she'd hunkered down in the mech, watching the plated walls, crisscrossed with reinforced beams, sliding up around her. As they descended deep into the earth, floodlights snapped on, illuminating the pit with eerily bright lights.

She'd felt this many times before, the hole in her chest simultaneously sinking and fluttering with excitement as she got closer to Shadow. The same feeling, wondering if this would be the day that he opened his eyes, that he finally escaped.

It never was. Always, he slept. And every time, he disappeared unresistant into the ground again, taking that flame of hope down with him.

Maybe, this time, it would be different.

Anyway, that was all she could hope for now

After a long time, the lift finally reached the bottom and jolted to a stop. Almost as soon as the mech stepped off the elevator, it was whirring to a start again, making the slow climb back up. Ivo frowned; they were already at the top, calling for the elevator again. If this so-called weapon couldn't help him -

An easy grin slid back onto his face. Well, he'd gotten himself out of plenty of crises before. He didn't have to worry.

The mech ducked into the only path, hunching down as it entered a dim corridor. It was lit only by soft emergency lights now - though it usually wasn't much brighter down here. Slowly it made its way

through the cramped rooms barely wide enough to contain it. There were a few doors leading to parts closets, resting rooms for scientists, or even other inactive experiments, but Ivo ignored them all.

What he was looking for was at the very end of the long hallways. So far down that most people would never think to delve so far into the darkness. At least until they saw the blue lights that emanated from beneath the metal doors, soft enough that you might think it was a dream.

He didn't try to blast it down this time. It opened quietly as he inserted the card, and he took a few tentative steps forward.

The doorway opened into a circular room lined with glass panels, a viscous blue liquid flowing inside them. Tubes strewn about the room drew out the gallons of liquid from the tanks, filtering it and keeping it moving, and they coiled straight down into a pit in the middle.

Maria liked this place, even if it was a prison. The soft humming of machinery reminded her of Grandfather's quiet, dark lab.

"Just like they said," Ivo murmured to himself. Maria didn't have time to wonder; the mech was lowering to the ground now, and she followed her cousin as he hopped out. In a gaudy red outfit, he looked out of place in her calm little haven. The closest thing to a home she'd had in Soliraz.

A computer panel curved about one edge of the center hole. Ivo peered into the pit, and Maria did too; it looked empty at the bottom, but if you stared closely, you could see the crevices in the floor. Hiding something important.

Her cousin turned back to the computer, pondering a moment, then took the device with a slot and stuck it into a rectangular hole on the panel. Immediately the screen lit up, lines of code flashing by too fast for Maria's wide eyes to comprehend.

When they finally halted, the tiny text on the screen read, "Please insert power source."

"Hmph! Just like the military to lock away their top-secret experiment behind the energy of a Chaos Emerald," Ivo grumbled. "Luckily, it seems that my information was good!"

Out of his pocket he pulled out a sparkling crystal, emanating such power that Maria could feel it from the afterlife. A familiar spark that reminded her of Shadow.

She'd only seen one of these once before, so long ago that she had nearly forgotten. This Emerald glinted silvery-blue in the light as her cousin put it into its slot on the panel.

A great rumble shook the facility as all lights on the panel turned green, and the monitor said: **ACCESS GRANTED.**

The round man was nearly thrown off his feet as the middle of the room began to rumble and rise. It locked to the floor level with a click, and from the very center, an opaque cylindrical tube pushed through the ground like a shoot of grass. Ivo and Maria stared up, speechless in wonder as the object rose before them. Tall, black, and silent, it towered over them. And for a moment, all was still.

Then, there was a whir and a click as the door cracked open. Dusty white fog rushed out with a whoosh, flooding the room with freezing, blinding mist. Then, a thud as something hit the ground.

And when the fog dissipated, there was Shadow.

Maria felt dazed, like she must be dreaming to see her friend there, unbound, awake, *free*. But there he was.

He sat crouched before his former containment, barely conscious with his eyes tightly shut. A mouthpiece dangled from a cord out of the pod, and his fur was wet with small globs of blue liquid caught in

it. Reality reeled and whirled about him, tangling up with unknown sounds and sensations.

But, Maria marvelled, he looked just as he had fifty years ago. Not a single feature wizened with age, no elements out of place. She could have been standing on the ARK in her memories and never known the difference.

"What's this?" Ivo's shocked voice drew the girl out of her reverie. "A hedgehog? *This* is my grandfather's secret experiment?"

Shadow still lay on the ground, immobile so that Maria wondered with dread worming through her if he was alive at all. Until she saw the slight twitch, the tightening of muscles.

Voices echoed in his head like gunshots. A steady male voice. A girl's shrill scream, her whisper fading away. *I will find you - SHADOW! - Promise me...* Red and black and blue, mixing together in grisly shades until he could only clutch his head and try to block them out. *Anything*, he thought, desperate. *Anything but this*.

White hot agony spread through his chest, crawling up his throat and poisoning his mind.

Avenge her...

And the pain, spreading into a blissful, unknowing numbness.

Avenge Maria!

Dazed red eyes opened, staring confused up at the figure standing before him. At the edge of his vision, he caught a glimpse of blue. When he looked, he saw only the tanks, still humming quietly.

That disorientation soon cleared, and the old mask descended over his features like a shroud. Slowly, the hedgehog sat up, staring warily at the man who watched him in stunned silence. "Who are

you?" Uncertain, he paused; he reached into his mind for memories and found none. "Who am I?"

Shadow's voice, even and controlled but *real*, sent chills to break the unfeeling. Even as she watched him open his eyes, Maria still hadn't been sure if this was really happening. A part of her had accepted that she'd never see Shadow conscious again, and she'd only lingered with the slightest hope. Yet, here he stood before her.

"Shadow?" Maria asked faintly, taking a slow step towards her friend. But his eyes remained fixated on her cousin, and he didn't so much as blink at her approach.

The girl's heart sank. He couldn't see her.

"I," said Ivo proudly, crossing an arm over his chest, "am Doctor Robotnik, the greatest scientist in the world!"

Shadow's impassive gaze did not betray his bewilderment.

The man continued, "And *you* are apparently the greatest experiment of the late Professor Gerald Robotnik, my grandfather."

"Experiment...?" Shadow stared down at his gloved hand, the fingers curling into a loose fist. *A scientific procedure*, his brain told him. *A test*. That couldn't be right, could it? Here he was, breathing, feeling his own heartbeat, so how could...

The Faunas sank down again, groaning in pain as those searing memories washed over him. Robotnik's shout of surprise didn't reach him as he was thrust into a vicious, garish past.

He stood immobilized in a white room, trapped between four walls. He couldn't move his body; his limbs may as well had weights tied to them. But there was a man, somehow like the one he'd just met, looking down on him with his face shadowed despite the glaring lights.

"This," he said to no one, his blue eyes locked on something far away, "is Shadow. The final result of my experiments... The ultimate lifeform."

The room swarmed with eyes, peering in, widening, narrowing, glaring. Memories surged and stretched, swarming around him like realities just out of his grasp.

Shadow slowly straightened, standing tall. When he opened his eyes again, they were burning. "My name is Shadow," he proclaimed, clinging to that one small surety. "And I am the ultimate lifeform."

Waking up with no past to speak of and an uncertain future, in a world that had forgotten him, this was all he had.

Robotnik was not impressed - of all the wonders he'd expected when he came down here, a simple Faunas was not one of them. Of course those creatures could possess great powers; he knew *that* much first-hand. But what could this hedgehog possibly be capable of that would make him worthy of his grandfather's legacy?

A great clatter and a shout rang from down the hall, quickly closing in on the little room. Soldiers. In a flash, Ivo snatched the Chaos Emerald from the panel and returned to his mech, behind the safety of his forcefield. "If you truly are the ultimate lifeform, Shadow," he said dismissively, "you should easily be able to dispatch these soldiers!"

Shadow blinked, staring up at the mech as it rose to full height, and Robotnik sighed. "G.U.N. will *kill* you. If you're not able to defeat their forces, we might not ever get out of here!"

The hedgehog had no time to wonder what he was talking about or why this was a "we" operation. The tall metal door was blasted down, crumpling like paper and sending the three scrambling for cover. In its place stood a mech much like Robotnik's own, but splashed with the colours of the United Federation. Behind the glass of the cockpit, you could just see the silhouette of a man.

The mech wasted no time; Shadow and Robotnik could hardly dive out of the way as a blast of rockets sailed forth. The glass wall behind them shattered, leaking blue gel and sparkling shards across the floor.

"Shadow! Do something!" Ivo cried, sending his own missiles towards the enemy mech. They exploded all but uselessly off the hard metal; bullets had a similar effect.

Instinct latched onto Shadow, propelling him into action. He didn't know what was guiding his actions, but it just felt right. In a flash, he leapt from the ground, twisting through the air and landing on the glass cockpit. Robotnik had to stare; his form was trained, perfect. The man inside recoiled, dropping the controls, and the hedgehog had his chance.

He swung his fist down, a blow that might have killed any human standing in its way. It collided with the glass - and cracked it, barely, imperceptibly. A tiny shard of glass, dislodged, fell on the man's nose.

Shadow, perched on the window, stopped and stared at his fist. He hadn't even been thinking, he was *sure*...

The man recovered, jerking the mech and sending him flying off. Robotnik watched this spectacle in disbelief. Then, groaning, he returned to the fruitless battle.

The Faunas only spent a moment on the ground, on his feet before Maria could make it to him - though the pain radiating up his back was a sharp reminder of his failure. As he watched the two robots warring, small explosions illuminating the room, he tried to think. Something was *missing*. He felt the lack of it like a crater inside him.

No, he thought. It was there. Whatever it was, he could feel it burning, radiating from his chest and up his arms. An agony that needed to be released. Shadow stood, slowly, eyes locked on the

guns that had now turned towards him. Before he could think there was a burning spear in his hand, red like the sinking sun.

Ivo felt the power, heard the crackling, familiar sound of raw energy, and tensed. Below him, the Faunas he had written off as inconsequential was harnessing that rare power as if it was meaningless. He opened his mouth in a silent shout of surprise.

Shadow reached back and let the spear fly. It cut cleanly through the air and pierced the glass like it wasn't there, sending pieces flying. The mech tipped and fell with a great crash, nearly shaking the entire facility. Its pilot, dead, gripping nothing at his throat as the chaos evaporated into mist.

"- *Chaos energy?!*" Robotnik finally managed to cry. He checked just to be sure, but the Emerald still lay safely next to him. Was this his grandfather's secret - a being who could harness chaos like it was *magic?!*

Shadow stared down at his hand, particles of energy still cracking until he willed it to dissipate. Now he felt it clearly, the energy flowing within his veins, pulsing through the very world like some immense being's heartbeat. Was this what made him the ultimate lifeform?

Then, he thought, so be it.

He had no idea who he was or where he had come from, but right now, that glimmer of knowledge - that he was the ultimate lifeform, whatever that may entail - was the only thing he knew about himself.

There were more important things to worry about now. The doctor was shouting, trying to get his attention. "Shadow!" he cried, looking as if he might fly right out of his seat. "Was that chaos?"

Shadow stared up at him, allowing uncertainty to slip into his expression. "I don't know." He scanned his mind: *C haos*, it told him, *an unstable energy that can turn thoughts into power, manifested*

primarily in Chaos Emeralds... He hadn't even been thinking; the impulse just came to him. But... "That seems right."

Robotnik shook his head, pushing the curiosity aside. He'd run tests later. "Shadow, listen to me. We're at the bottom of the most well-protected military facility in the world, do you understand? Neither of us are getting out of here alive if we don't trust each other." Shadow's face betrayed nothing, even as he held out the glittering silver crystal.

"Kill the soldiers in our way, and I'll get you out of Soliraz." He held the Emerald out. "Deal?"

It was a gamble to be sure. But the doctor, always with a meticulously plotted plan, had not known what he would find down here. All he knew was that Shadow would make the perfect ally - and gifting him a Chaos Emerald might just win his favour.

Shadow didn't spend long considering it. He had no direction, no purpose; this man who claimed to be his creator's grandson was his only lead. The hedgehog nodded slightly. "Fine."

Ivo sighed. He hated to let go of this, but he had no choice. Reluctantly, he tossed the Emerald down, and Shadow caught it easily. Anyway, he thought to himself, there were always six more.

"Just be careful with those!" the man barked, readying the mecha's controls. "Don't use too much power - I'll need it when you're done!"

For the first time, Shadow almost smiled. Thoughts into power, right? He was gone in an instant, only a bright trail of chaos behind him. Robotnik scrambled for the control stick and dashed out before Maria could climb on, so she ran off after them.

She glanced back at the blue room that had been her home for the past decades, now in ruin from the short battle, but she had to pull herself away. The girl turned back to the long hallway before her, chasing the fading particles of energy that Shadow left behind. In

half an hour, everything had changed. She would never see that room again. But she focused on running, her slippered feet soundless on the metal floors.

They didn't make it far before the soldiers came. Men and women on foot with their weapons trained on Shadow; tall mechs that shined dully in the dark halls. They couldn't go around, so they all stopped there, staring each other down.

Shadow was still, waiting for them to make the first move. He didn't know yet that he was immortal. But then, even he could die with that many guns pointed at him.

"Experiment 56!" A woman's voice blasted through a robot's intercom. From the inside of the tall, silvered mech, you could just see her darkened face, the glint of glasses. "Your body has been planted with five military-grade explosives! Stand down, or we will detonate the bombs!"

Maria froze. That couldn't be true... She had followed them every time, and they had only taken samples, they had never...

But no, she had been absent for twenty or thirty years. Anything could have happened while she was searching for Shadow.

"What?!" Ivo roared, backing his mech up, desperately putting distance between them.

Shadow wasn't sure whether to believe her until he heard the sound. The hedgehog tensed and looked down sharply; a steady, muffled beeping was coming from inside him. He was a walking bomb.

"Stand down!" the woman repeated sharply, her finger hovering over the control panel. All she had to do was speak, and the escapee would be blown to pieces - hardly what they wanted, but the alternative could not be allowed. Though few alive that day knew what Shadow was, or what he was capable of, this was their orders.

Maria stared at her friend, spectral blue eyes terrified. Shadow had finally escaped... But there had never been hope for him in the first place - even if he made it out, they would have just detonated the explosives anyway! The only thing he could do was give up and go back!

There was no way he could ever escape this place.

But Shadow's expression darkened, and he stepped forward, a ball of chaos forming itself in his hands. The woman jumped inside the mech, gripping her earpiece with one hand. Her voice wavered. "Experiment 56! Surrender now!"

He stopped and stood still, and for a moment, they all thought that he would.

Everything happened at once. The hedgehog was in the air, his body cutting straight towards the commander's mech. Bullets exploded, missing and ricocheting off the metal body of Ivo's robot. Maria launched forward, crying, "Shadow, don't!" But he was already gone, and he wouldn't have stopped if he had heard her.

He wouldn't go back, without knowing anything - where he had come from, who he was, why he was here. Shadow would not let them put him in the ground again. That was how he felt.

Shadow landed hard on the glass, cracking it, as the chaos in his hands lit the woman's face a petrified green. She looked up, hesitant, but there was a finality in her eyes. "Detonate the bombs!" the soldier cried.

"No!" Maria sank to the ground, already seeing the explosions, the brief flash of light, only an instant, as Shadow was torn from this world.

They all went still in the silence, holding their breaths like something had happened, like they were all stuck in the moment before. Even Shadow was frozen on the glass, waiting. Then the long, dreadful

moment ended, and the Faunas still stood there, fully intact, impossibly breathing.

The woman looked up at him in terror, shrinking down in her chair. "But... The bombs..." She almost whimpered.

Somewhere in the afterlife, Gerald was probably laughing. He laughed as glass and metal and blood flew, as an entire platoon of soldiers was decimated in all but moments. The Emerald was still glowing hot in his hand as Shadow took off down the hall without even a pause. Ivo and Maria, helplessly watching the destruction, could only follow.

Maria turned away from the bodies as she passed them, revulsion and relief mixing inside her. *It's the only way*, she thought guiltily, bowing her head.

They had condemned him to an eternity of imprisonment; they had ripped away the only life he'd ever known. And they would never have let him escape. It was the *only* way, she told herself, though she still wondered if this slaughter was necessary. But what could she do?

She'd had years to listen, and that old disgust with G.U.N. had somehow turned to sympathy. Sitting in the darkness, waiting for the gates to open, she'd heard them talk of families, parents and children to return to, old hobbies to pick up when this all was over. Just waiting to go home. And now, their blood lay spattered behind her, the old hopes pooling around their wrenched-open eyes.

But Shadow was alive. She let out the breath she'd been holding for longer than any human could. Somehow, he was alive, and that was what mattered. Now he just had to make it to safety, and it would all be over. No more bloodshed, in her name or otherwise.

Little did she know.

The girl made it to the elevator just as it was beginning its ascent, carrying Ivo and Shadow that much closer to the surface. Tiredly she pulled herself onto the platform and sank down, mentally exhausted if not physically. They still had a long way to go.

And Shadow, she realized wearily, would not be safe even when they got there. If G.U.N. was willing to plant bombs inside him... They would never give up. He would always be on the run, and she would just have to follow.

Silently they watched as the floodlights sank into the earth around them, the door at the top of the pit drawing ever closer - behind it, surely, an army waiting just for them.

Shadow knew this, and it troubled him, driving him to speak. "Doctor," he called out, drawing the man out of another of his devices, "where are we exactly? Who is it that I'm killing?"

"Hmm? I'm surprised you've grown a conscience, after how many soldiers you've *already* killed," the Doctor said, turning back to his task. Shadow's red eyes, boring into him still, drew him out again.

Robotnik sighed. "In due time, Shadow. We have bigger things to worry about."

Shadow crossed his arms. "I want answers."

The man wavered; they were approaching the door fast, and anyway, he didn't want to reveal everything he knew and have the hedgehog run off. But that *stare*, the way he stood perfectly still and silent, glaring at you all the while, was worse than any interrogation.

"Alright, alright," he relented, throwing up his hands. "I'll make this brief. We are located near the bottom of one of the major facilities of the Guardian Unit of Nations," he recited, "the United Federation's 'peacekeeping' army."

"Peacekeeping, indeed," he muttered under his breath. "G.U.N. must have been storing you here for years. Decades, even."

Shadow stared. "*Decades?*" Having no past was bad enough - learning you were an experiment, whatever *that* meant - but to be locked away in this strange facility for that long?

"Yes," Maria confirmed quietly, though no one could hear her.

Ivo shook his head, muttering to himself, "Project Shadow ended over fifty years ago, so..." The three of them jerked as the elevator locked into place at the top. Behind the door they could hear the clamour of soldiers and guns. "There's no time for this. Let's go."

"Wait!" Shadow exclaimed, grabbing the Chaos Emerald from where he'd set it down. "Why am I even here? Where did I come from? What did I do to make them-"

The doors cracked open unwary of his unanswered questions, and he jumped out of the way as bullets sailed through the gap into the chamber.

" *Soon*, Shadow," the Doctor promised earnestly, hunching over the controls. "When we're safe, I'll tell you everything you need to know."

Shadow frowned, unsatisfied, but he had no choice but to go along with this. The doors were opening wider now, revealing the forces on the other side.

Anyway, one thing was for sure: Whoever this "G.U.N." organization was, they wanted him dead. They'd interred him here for years, decades, going as far as to plant him with bombs (false or not). He didn't have time to think more about this, but he was defending himself, that was all.

So into the crowd he flew, leaving trails of violence behind him, while Maria looked away and dreamed of a day when all of this would finally end.

They were no match for Shadow. They never were, Maria thought ruefully.

It shouldn't have been easy to escape from one of the most heavily-guarded military facilities in the world. But Eggman had done everything perfectly. He'd drawn G.U.N.'s attention away and procured an Emerald in the process. He'd waited until Friday evening, just as the island's newest recruits were settling in, and the veterans went home for the weekend.

And, though it apparently hadn't been quite strong enough, he'd overloaded the generator and jammed the island's signals, cutting off all access to the rest of the military.

Well, that part had *almost* gone smoothly.

Their resistance, as they slowly made their way towards the surface, may as well have been nothing. They were 18- and 20-year-olds who had never been in a war, much less weathered anything like the onslaught that was the ultimate lifeform with a Chaos Emerald. Soldiers who hadn't been taught how to use the advanced heavy weaponry. And people who were new to the endless hallways, got lost in them. Ivo had a map.

They may as well have let them pass unhindered, for all the good it did to try stopping them. But they didn't, and they died, and the trio moved ever forward.

Until they reached the final stretch: the long ramp that led up to the surface, its great doors already open as soldiers poured down like water.

Shadow seemed to be flying, a black blur that sped down the tunnel. Robotnik fired into the crowd, taking down people in waves, until the hedgehog burst into it. Soldiers went flying; the lucky ones catapulted to the bottom of the tunnel, broken but out of harm's way.

The rest were soon evaporated by blasts of raw energy. Shadow stood up and saw that they were all gone.

Then Ivo was there, his mech crashing into the courtyard. Shadow followed, stepping through a doorway so bright that it seemed like a portal, and he took his first steps into sunlight.

The glare was blinding, and he had to cover his face, reeling from the sheer amount of sunlight pouring around him. In the distance, far away without any walls to block it, he saw a sky painted with colors unlike he'd ever seen. Muted hues and greys, that was all he'd known.

But these oranges and reds mixed like deep flames, fading to streaks of pink and blue, all set with a blazing, perfectly round orb that hung near the horizon... He could hardly tear his gaze off the sky, until he remembered suddenly where he was, and the urgency of his situation set in again.

When his eyes finally adjusted to the new light, he saw that the courtyard was empty. But behind them, they could hear the thunder of footsteps clattering towards the surface.

Robotnik already had his device out and was furiously tapping buttons on the glowing screen. "Come on, come on..." he muttered, glancing back warily.

Shadow snapped to attention as something sped around a corner, coming to rest beyond the wire fence. A vehicle, but not one he could identify; it hovered precariously in the air, but was small, barely large enough for a pair of pilots.

Wordlessly Robotnik took off, gunning down the electrified fence gate. Shadow covered his eyes at the glorious explosion of sparks that followed, but the mech was dashing through before the crackle of electricity could even fade. The hedgehog was right behind him.

Shadow saw it before he could reach the hovership, and it all but stopped him in his tracks.

Just over the cliff edge, at the shore of Soliraz Island, lay an expanse of blue that stretched to the horizon. It rolled, tenuous. Unlike solid ground, always shifting and changing. One moment blue, the next catching the blinding white sunlight, then fading to the deep again.

The Faunas quickly shook off the reverie; he knew he was getting distracted, but though it made no sense, he somehow felt like this was his first time seeing these wonders. Which only reminded him why he was here: to extract information about his past out of this strange man. Where could he have come from to know nothing of the world he walked in?

Ivo was on his way out of the mech. He clambered over the metal rim and flopped ungraciously to the ground. "Come on, Shadow, in the ship!" he cried as he hoisted himself into it, leaving the mech hunched over on the ground.

The hedgehog came back to himself with a blink. "What about - ?"

"Expendable; I'll build another. Let's go!"

Behind them, they heard the clatter of footsteps on metal and stone as soldiers rushed through the bunker gates, pouring into the courtyard. Shadow wasted no time in starting towards the hovering vehicle.

And all this time, Maria had been running.

She burst out into the sunlight with the rest of the soldiers, losing herself for a moment in the writhing crowd. Shadow and her cousin had never stopped on that last floor, and slowly, they'd begun to outpace her. Until she'd lost them entirely. But she knew the winding halls and the shortcuts better than even a map, and that was what had brought her here so quickly.

Now, she saw as she ducked under arms and through the gaps between men, she hadn't missed them entirely. But through the gates that now lay bent and twisted on the ground, Shadow was leaving.

She'd never make it in time.

The girl ran. She ran like hell or worse was after her, like the soldiers she miraculously broke through weren't there. The ground and sky whirled, blurring, until she looked like a comet shooting towards the cliff edge.

But when she got there, Shadow would be gone. Already he had one hand on the edge. The next moment, he'd pull himself in. The glass dome would fly shut and he would be gone, Maria left behind. And the search would begin all over again.

So she did the only thing she could think of.

" *SHADOW!*"

And the world seemed to spin to a stop. She thought, perhaps, it really had ended, until soldiers thundered past her, enveloping her in the crowd.

It wasn't the world that had frozen. It was Shadow, who, half into the ship already, was staring back with the strangest look on his face. A look like, maybe, before the crowd had swallowed her, there had been a girl standing among them.

"What are you *doing?!*" Ivo screamed, snapping Shadow back into reality. "Get in! Now!"

A few soldiers made it there first, but a swift kick to the face disabled them. By the time Shadow had hauled himself into the cockpit, Maria was there, pulling herself over the edge with a strength she didn't know she had. She dropped to the floor in a heap just as the glass dome locked shut.

And then they were gone, zooming off over the ocean. As Maria rose, just able to peek out the backs of the chairs, she saw the island flying away behind her. In moments, the place she had spent the past few decades of her life imprisoned was but a speck on the horizon.

She was free.

"What was *that* about?" Suddenly drained, Maria sank into one of the few seats in the back, watching as Ivo pressed various colourful buttons on the holographic front panel.

Shadow had remained standing despite the movement of the ship making it hard to stay on his feet. But finally, as if realizing that he was no longer in danger, he too sat down wearily. "I - " He hesitated, the lie almost invisible. "I don't know."

Ivo shook his head. "Never mind. We made it out, if only barely." He glanced back. "Will you give me back the Chaos Emerald?"

Shadow complied, tossing it towards the front. The man fumbled slightly but caught it, immediately setting to work examining it. Maria noticed even from there that it had lost its luster somewhat, not glimmering with quite as much intensity. Even its color seemed less saturated.

"Hmm..." He stuck it in his pocket, turning back to the controls. "You certainly used a lot of energy back there, but the Emerald doesn't even seem to be drained. There should be more than enough to spare."

Though he was turned towards the window, Robotnik seemed to know of the perplexed look on Shadow's face. "If you sap all of an Emerald's energy, it fades and appears somewhere else on Earth. I'd rather not begin this scavenger hunt over again," he quipped dryly.

Shadow was silent, knowing this unspoken question was all he would be allowed for now. Maria dared a glance at him, but his gaze

was elsewhere. If he had spotted her before - or even if, maybe, he had stopped for another reason - he definitely couldn't see her now. Sighing, she slumped forward.

Well... At least she was here. At least Shadow wasn't somewhere out there on Earth.

The hedgehog, finally, seemed to fully relax. His shoulders fell and he allowed himself to lean back in his seat, though he still kept a guarded eye on this strange man. "Where are we going?"

"One of my underground bases, in the deserts near Renegade City," was the prompt reply. "If we can make it without G.U.N. catching up to us, we'll be safe there." Blue eyes glanced back, examining the dark hedgehog. "For now." Always on the run from the military and Sonic, he'd gone through enough bases to expect little more than that.

For now, Shadow thought, leaning against the glass that barely separated him and the vermillion sky. Everything was always temporary. This he felt, not knowing why.

He didn't know if he could trust this person, this man who promised answers, promised shelter from those who had drained his memories away. He knew, somehow, that it was never that easy.

But there was nothing left to say. Nothing to do but wait and see what happened. He was here now, safe for the time being. Though he didn't know it, friends from long ago were watching over him. And Soliraz was already gone, the prison not even distant on the horizon. The ocean stretched on behind him, empty and free.

So he watched the sun sink into the depths of the ocean, and the fiery sky drain to a quiet black.

Eerie. That's what the soldiers on Soliraz said about the island at night. Laughing, they made up ghost stories, on dares ran terrified

through the night like little kids as guards rolled their eyes, knowing better than to shoot.

But behind the hazing there was something more: a genuine, deep-rooted fear. The jungle was sinister in the dark, its trees bending and swaying though there was no breeze, reaching out like alive things. Sounds came from deep within it, primal ones that sent soldiers scurrying for the barracks.

Even the stark floodlights, keeping the fences lit bright as day, looked unnatural and strange. The shadows seemed darker and they could have held anything within their depths.

But this night, Soliraz's courtyard was filled with unusual activity. Military investigators buzzed about, the low hum of conversation and scribbling of pens deafening. But they all cleared away, raising their fists in a tired salute, as a group ascended out of Soliraz underground.

The man that led them into the dark courtyard did not, by appearance, stand out very much. He stood only at the taller end of average height, and his face was wizened enough that the somewhat unusual silver hair no longer attracted odd looks.

It was his perfectly trained gait and form that drew immediate attention. His very presence commanded respect, and his hard glare *demand*ed it. So even if the soldiers had not seen the gold stars that marked his rank, they would have saluted him.

If only out of fear.

The group of high-ranking soldiers wasted no time; they had already seen the rest of the bloody facility, followed the killer's trail from bottom to top. Now they made their way to the mech, left abandoned by the edge of the cliff, and crowded around it.

For a few moments, they said nothing, staring down at the remains of the machine. The nearby floodlights lit it harshly, revealing all the

imperfections in the design - this had not been made in any military factory. The paint job looked uneven and hastily applied.

"Colonel." His voice was imposing even in only that one word, and it shattered the stillness. Everyone, even those who hadn't been addressed, jumped to attention.

Anxious, the woman answered hastily, "Commander, sir?"

"Have they been found? Any updates?" His voice was terse, strained.

As if to make sure, she pulled a small device out of her pocket, her face briefly lit by green glow. Her eyes scanned it slowly, meticulously, though there were no notifications. "No, sir," she finally said tentatively. "By the time the air force was mobilized, they were long gone. No one has seen them since."

The silence was too long, and she offered, like an apology, "They're still searching."

After a few endless seconds, the Commander exhaled. "Hand me a flashlight," he said, tired. They all scrambled, and one was quickly provided.

It only took a few moments; they made way for him as he paced around in the dirt to the place where he already knew the answer would be. He reached out to trace the letters stamped into the leg: **EVC.**

"Robotnik," the Commander muttered.

They all stared, almost afraid. Despite his incompetency, Eggman was as much a threat to them as they were to him. While he possessed unusual intellect and could whip up an army that would destroy the country, he was only one man. So he usually avoided the military; to boldly infiltrate one of the most well-guarded G.U.N. bases in the Federation...

"You don't seem surprised," one of the men said, careful.

The Commander straightened. "No." To their shock, his grim face almost curled into a grin. "At least he didn't leave his insignia on it this time."

The man turned to pacing, and the group scuttled out of the way as he stepped slowly over the ground. "No one else in the world would or could have infiltrated this facility." He stopped next to the dead mech, slapping its metal leg. "It was the perfect crime. Everything methodically planned - down to the positioning of the EMP device."

He shook his head. "Only a Robotnik could pull this off, or would bother, to go after that experiment."

The few there who knew Gerald Robotnik's name nodded. The rest said nothing, knowing better than to ask.

"What will he do now?" someone ventured uncertainly.

One of those almost-smiles shadowed the Commander's face again. "What he always does, I imagine. I doubt he knew what he was getting into, releasing the experiment. But I'm certain he plans to use him to capture the Chaos Emeralds. To what purpose, this time?" He could only shrug.

Promptly, the man turned to someone in the group. "General, I want every soldier in Renegade City on the Federal Reserve. Immediately."

He nodded. "Yessir."

Next the Commander looked to the lead military investigator, a wiry woman with silver glasses and a long ponytail. "How many died today?"

She looked surprised, not expecting the question. "A-ah, well, they're still counting the bodies - " She thought for a minute, poring over the

data on her tablet. "It must be over a hundred, if not more..." She continued rambling, "Estimated cost of damages even higher, at - "

The Commander waved his hand, silencing her. "No, that doesn't matter. A hundred people died today, in a senseless act of violence. As if they were nothing." He paused, turning towards the sea that touched the shore like it always had, unknowing of what had happened today. "A hundred families lost someone. A hundred people will never go home."

The blue light made his eyes seem somehow more menacing; he glared up at the full, clear moon as if he could intimidate it out of the sky. "This must stop before it happens again; the experiment *must* be contained. We will find Robotnik. And he will pay for this."

His scowl deepened. "... As will Shadow."

He would see to that personally, if he had to.

But the time for revenge would come later. The Commander strode off into the darkness, returning to the depths of the facility to help his men collect the dead and dying. For now, it was all he could do.

Directive

A/N:

Haha, I have to apologize for the third time in a row...

So this nine-month gap is partially the work of distraction (I've written a lot, just... not on this), and partially depression plus general lack of inspiration for this story. Sorry. I'm tired.

It's clearing up now, especially since I decided to cut this chapter short. I'll have to mess with the outline to make this fit into 15 chapters again - this is the intended ending point of chapter two - but stopping here before I ended up with another huge mess of a chapter felt better. And I'll have a fresh start, which will make writing easier.

If this isn't done by October 2020 then I'm going to have to temporarily switch focus to a different story. It's the ten-year anniversary of a fic reboot I'm planning, so it has to be started then no matter what I'm in the middle of. Hopefully it won't come to that.

I never dreamed of escape anymore.

Fifty years ago... Sometimes I close my eyes and it feels like it was yesterday. Even, like I'll open them again and be there on the ARK. I can still feel who we used to be. Who I used to be. If I woke up back then, I think I'd almost be able to go on like nothing had happened.

But then, when I opened my eyes, I'd be in Soliraz. I would stare into a mirror and no one would be looking back.

It's not like it was before. Our world is different now. And people change too, you know? Sometimes I still feel like that scared little

kid, but I'm not really a kid anymore, am I? I guess I'm still me, but it's not the same. It never will be.

And you don't have the years I do. You said you couldn't remember anything, but are you still the same as you were back then?

Anyway, at least we're away from the military. That's all that's important.

I don't know what's going to happen... But I hope you'll have the chance to pursue your own dreams on Earth, for once. And I promise I'll be there... No matter what you do, I meant it when I said I would always be by your side. Even if you don't know it. Do you believe me?

There's a whole world out there, Shadow! I know it's not what you wanted, but... You're here now. And there's all sorts of things on Earth, the things I promised we'd get to see. Seasons, and trees, and cities... Even under these circumstances... I can't wait for you to experience them too!

For such a long time, I'd given up... I thought that you'd be stuck down there forever; I was always wondering why I bothered staying. And I know that G.U.N. is after you, and I know the future is uncertain... But all that is behind us. There's a better world waiting for us, I just know it.

Shadow... We're really free, aren't we?

Get out. It was all he could think of, all there was. Look forward. Run. Escape. Nothing else mattered but the hallway stretching before him, not even...

"Shadow?"

He whipped around. Somehow, she had fallen behind, he'd been so worried about going forward that -

He tried to jet towards her, but his feet were cemented to the floor. All at once, his limbs were too heavy to even fight it.

We have to go. Why wasn't she moving? Her eyes were blue cinders; he couldn't tear his away. *We have to go, now!* Until he heard the *drip-drip* like water and a freezing cold crept through him. With every drop that hit the ground, he felt as if he was being ripped further out of his body.

She spread her arms, smiling with chilling cheerfulness as red stained her skin and snaked down her fingers, falling to the floor.

"I'm dying, Shadow."

The hedgehog jolted awake, not a cry or a whisper escaping him as he nearly scrambled to his feet. At the last moment, he remembered where he was and sank back into the chair. Only a startled Maria noticed the trails of energy that wisped up his arms and evaporated in the dark.

Shadow immediately chastised himself for falling asleep in the presence of this strange man taking him to places unknown. But for now, the Doctor was too engrossed in the hovership's controls to have done anything to him. Where he was driving them, on the other hand...

Turning his gaze out the window, Shadow assessed the area and saw the distant twinkling lights of a cityscape against the ocean. It was full night now, and black had engulfed the world like the inky depths of the sea. He couldn't make out anything but those few lights.

Maria, for one, had been paying attention. She must have passed through this city to get to Soliraz, she'd thought, frowning. It had perhaps even been where Christian lived.

But before the darkness had shrouded it, the land meant nothing to her. All her time in that city had been spent inland, the ocean

nowhere near in sight. And it'd been so long ago, she couldn't remember how long she'd walked from those quiet suburbs to reach the coast.

If she reached hard enough, she'd be able to see it like she was still walking there. Blue skies, picturesque houses lined up behind her as she left them behind. Every road she crossed to get to the docks, every step. But it was buried under years and years of memories, hard to find.

She wondered, could she just find the right street, if that old house would still be standing there. She wondered who she'd find inside it. Where did children on Earth go once they'd grown up?

But then, Christian had gone to join G.U.N. There was no telling where he was now.

"Awake?" Robotnik's voice startled the both of them. Maria noticed then one of the cameras on the front panel pointing towards the back of the cockpit, showing Shadow's silhouette and the empty chair where she sat. "Good. We're almost there."

Shadow didn't acknowledge him, his gaze trained out the window. Though he could see little, he was able to pick out some features of the landscape as they began to change.

What few trees there were thinned out to occasional branchy, dead things standing alone. The land flattened, fading to black before it could hit the even horizon. Dotting the terrain were the huge dark forms of rocks, alone or stacked into hills.

Even Maria was perplexed by the strange scenery. The rocks and sparse flora made her think of the deserts she'd seen in picture books, but what kind of desert was covered in brown grass and bushes?

Shadow jumped as something *pinged!* off the metal ceiling of the ship, like a gunshot shattering the quiet. "What was that?" he asked

in alarm.

"Hmm?" Robotnik glanced back, but his gaze was soon distracted by the controls.

That sound rang through the air again, then again, and Shadow stiffened with each tiny assault on the hovership. But the Doctor didn't even seem to notice, hunched over the front panel with his face faintly lit by a green glow.

When nothing happened despite the pings turning into a faster *thump-thump-thump* on the roof, Shadow relaxed a bit. Though he still remained tensed, ready to jump into action at any moment.

Finally they came to rest in a seemingly innocuous patch of empty desert, dry grass billowing out as the hovership slowly descended to the ground and stopped with a slight jolt. Robotnik stood, stretching and pulling out a rectangular device from one of his many coat pockets, as Shadow peered out into the darkness. "I don't see any - "

The device beeped as the Doctor tapped it, and the whole ground quaked violently and wrenched itself open before the ship. Rumbling, two squat buildings rose as if magic from beneath the earth, a simple door set into one and a tall, wide opening engulfing the other. Moonlight gleamed off the polished white surfaces.

"Alright, everybody out." A side door on the ship cracked open with a whoosh, and Robotnik gestured towards it. Shadow and Maria complied, hopping into the cool night air.

It was like stepping through a forcefield into a new world. All at once, Shadow was aware of the distant rushing of wind through grass blades, the endless drone of insects that seemed to occasionally take a breath all together. On Soliraz that wild sound had hummed faintly far away, but now it was encompassing around him. The hedgehog pricked his ears forward, listening to it.

The hovership's door provided a brief shelter against the weather, but Robotnik began to maneuver the vessel into the larger building, fully exposing Shadow to the weather. He was scanning the dark horizon with narrowed eyes when the first raindrop hit him. He yelped and whirled around, a ball of chaos forming in his hands.

When nothing happened, Shadow lifted his arm to stare at where he'd been struck as another drop collided. He looked up in alarm, then flinched as one of those cold bullets hit him in the eye.

But, realizing that this wasn't a dangerous threat, he reached his hand out to the stars. In growing wonder he watched as the drops of water hit his gloves and spread over the cloth. Like an ocean falling from the sky. A tiny miracle.

Presently Robotnik emerged from the wide opening, its metal door sliding swiftly shut behind him. "Come on, get inside," he said disinterestedly, heading for the other building.

When Shadow didn't move, the man looked back, seeing him staring in wonder at the raindrops like it was some marvel. "What? Have you really never seen rain before?" he asked, crossing his arms.

Shadow blinked and looked at him, clearly perplexed, and Robotnik remembered. "Right, you were created on the ARK," he noted with a nod. "You've likely never experienced anything like this before."

The hedgehog stared, tilting his head at those familiar words. "The ARK...?"

Realizing that he'd slipped, Robotnik turned away quickly. "Get in, before someone notices us."

There weren't signs of civilization for miles, so this was hardly a concern, but that wasn't what Shadow was worried about. He dashed after the Doctor as he stepped through the door, heading down a brightly lit stairwell that seemed to stretch to infinity.

"You promised you'd tell me more about who I am!" he yelled down it.

Despite the man's stocky form, he was having a hard time keeping up with him as they descended the narrow stairs. Anything short of level ground felt like a strange phenomenon. Where was he from?

Robotnik stepped off the last stair and into a long, darkened corridor. By now, Shadow was right behind him. The lights clicked on, making him flinch, as the Doctor raised his rectangular glass device and poked at the screen. "First, I don't make promises."

He pressed a button, and Shadow hastily hopped off the last step as the stairwell began to rumble and condense into itself. When it was done, the long flight was only a few feet tall, its closed door leading straight into rock.

"Second," he continued, turning and walking briskly down the hall, "my exact words were that I would tell you what you needed to know. And precisely what that entails is up to me, is it not?"

Begrudgingly Shadow followed, though his frown was apparent. "If you're not going to give me answers, then I'll leave and find them myself - "

"Shadow, you are several stories underground, in *my* base no less. I would advise you to think more about your situation before you make any hasty decisions." Robotnik met the hedgehog's glare, but Shadow said nothing. He wasn't wrong - even if he had to kill the man, he had no idea how to get out of here.

Shadow stopped, staring in silent consternation at the smooth white tiles beneath his feet. Killing Robotnik, just to get him out of the way... Why had that been his first thought...?

Maria, tagging along silently, was beginning to think she didn't like her cousin very much.

Sighing, Robotnik turned and continued, heading down a much identical side hall. "Regardless, it isn't my intention to make an enemy out of you. And frankly, I'm beginning to wonder if you're worth the trouble," he muttered under his breath. "If you want to leave, you are free to go."

They reached a metal door, which slid out of the way, allowing him to step into a huge round room. Shadow scanned the area, eyes widening as he took it all in.

A center console lit up with a hologram showing the date and weather, among other mundane information, as they approached. Lining every inch of the walls were screens, packed with information, graphs, or what looked to be camera feeds. Beneath them lay rows and rows of metal consoles, filled with all manner of confusing buttons and dials.

Robotnik headed over to a lavish chair, too large even for him, and sank tiredly into it. The chair whirred and began to sweep along a track cut into the inner perimeter of the floor, resting in front of one of the many consoles.

"However," he continued, "if you have questions, then I will try to answer them." The display above him flashed as he began fiddling with the glowing buttons.

Shadow had been staring up in confusion at one of the screens, but at this, he looked back. "You said something about this 'Project Shadow'. That I'm some kind of experiment. What do you mean by that?"

Robotnik's eyes flicked across a screen for a moment, stalling, before his chair spun around. "In truth, I don't know much." He sighed, fingers steepled as he began. "Project Shadow was a top secret Federational experiment conducted aboard the Space Colony ARK, headed by my grandfather, Professor Gerald Robotnik.

"That, I presume, is where you were created." A brief smile cracked across his face, twitching his moustache. "Not exactly difficult to put two and two together there."

That had been Maria's fault. Then again, Shadow's official name was Experiment 56, so it wasn't meant to be that obvious. The girl leaned on the central console, watching her cousin continue his spiel.

"The project, however, was suddenly shut down. It was said that Gerald was planning to overthrow the United Federation with a weapon of mass destruction - you, I imagine. He and the other scientists involved were captured and executed by G.U.N., the ARK and its projects abandoned. End of story."

Robotnik sighed. "This is what the public was told. And eventually, everyone just forgot."

Shadow stood silently, processing this. So he was some kind of... weaponized test subject? And that was why they'd locked him at the bottom of that facility? He wasn't exactly sure how to feel about that.

Maria was not exactly surprised at this version of events. She'd heard that story a thousand times before: her grandfather a traitor, Shadow no more than a vaguely referred to "weapon". No mention of her, or the people who'd been murdered. Or Project Shadow, for that matter, not by name.

"Do you want to know what I think?" Robotnik didn't wait for his answer. "I don't believe a word they said about what happened that day. Grandfather wasn't exactly the... world domination type. Doesn't run in the family." He snorted. "And my cousin, Maria Robotnik, was somehow killed too. She wasn't much older than twelve or thirteen; I rather doubt she was one of the revolutionaries."

Shadow blinked and furrowed his brows, suddenly overcome with a strange feeling like a memory about to break. "Maria...?"

The girl looked over at him in surprise, but his eyes were fixated on the shiny metal floor and the blurry reflection staring back up at him. He seemed to have total amnesia as far as she could tell, but the way he'd said her name...

"Yes. Maria." Robotnik glanced back, but if he was thinking something, he didn't speak. There was no way this experiment had known his cousin. "After that, the Federation made sure my parents kept quiet and didn't ask too many questions, especially about her and Gerald.

"I was too young to really know what was going on, but my father started becoming obsessed, convinced himself she was still alive somehow, and - "

Realizing that he was saying too much, Robotnik quickly spun around, returning to typing on a panel. His hurried motions spoke of something different than his unwavering voice. "Anyway, I think there's more to it than a treasonous old man and a kid caught in the crossfire, and that's what I've been trying to figure out."

This was somewhat a lie - he would have liked to know more about the project, his grandfather, his cousin. But his motives were much simpler than that. Gerald may not have intended to use Shadow to take over the UF, but Ivo...

Well, he'd just have to see how this all played out. "I don't know why G.U.N. so suddenly and violently ended Project Shadow, but I would guess that they captured you after subduing the ARK. And you've been interred at Soliraz Island ever since."

His chair flew across the room, bringing him closer to Shadow, and he glanced over. "Any of this sounding familiar? Professor Gerald Robotnik, the ARK, G.U.N.?"

Shadow narrowed his eyes, reaching back into his memories. Those words stirred something inside him, but his mind was just as blank and empty as before. "No. I don't remember anything."

He hesitated - but the Doctor didn't need to know about those strange wisps of visions, a man standing before him, a girl's far-off cries. Whether those were remnants of memories, or just a product of his imagination, he wasn't sure yet.

"Hmm." Robotnik's expression was obscured by the huge chair's bright plush back. "Well, that's all the information I can offer. I could only recover some of Gerald's logs."

Shadow was still deep in thought when Robotnik circled the room again, coming to rest right in front of him. "Let's make a deal, Shadow." He flashed whitened teeth, blinding in the harsh coloured glow of the screen-lit room. "We'll figure this out together. You help me with whatever I ask, and I'll help you find out more about your past."

The hedgehog crossed his arms, taking a few steps back. He was unsure about his directive, or where to go if he didn't accept, but even he knew that an open-ended deal like that might not be in his best interests. "How do I know you're not just making all this up?"

Sighing in mild irritation, Robotnik turned and pressed a colourful glowing button on a silvery panel. Scrolling through menus on the screen before him, he found what he was looking for and activated it.

Shadow turned as the center console lit up, the list of information replaced with a video feed. A man's wizened face appeared, blurry in the stretched hologram. His exhaustion was apparent even through the pixellation. "Beginning Project Shadow weekly log. January 20, 1958. 20:32 hours. Week 372."

The man went on to list various mundane data points, but Shadow didn't catch a word of it. Him and Maria both stared up at the hologram with identical looks of shock. "That's... the Professor," Shadow said quietly.

How he knew that, he wasn't sure. But that was Gerald. He was positive.

"Grandfather..." Maria stepped towards the hologram, reaching out. She hadn't seen his face in so long - and even then it had only been blurry, black and white pictures in a newspaper. The video feed was low quality, but there he was, moving like he was real, like he...

The hologram flicked off before she could touch the light, and Robotnik turned back. "If you don't want to stay here, you don't have to..." He shrugged, barely masking a coy grin. "But I'm your best shot at finding out more about your past. Help me, and I'll help you."

He stuck out a hand again. Shadow glared at it, but relented, taking it in a terse shake. "Fine."

Standing between them, Maria watched this interaction with concern. Something was... wrong here. Shadow seemed wary too, so that was some comfort, but she wasn't sure how to feel about her cousin's intentions.

Still, she couldn't blame Shadow for wanting to know more about what had happened back then. Maybe, once he'd figured out that much, he could leave and make his own path. Though she wasn't sure how he could find the information he was looking for - G.U.N. probably had it under lock and key. And military-grade encryption.

All she could hope for was that this exchange was only temporary.

Robotnik's grin broke, and the next instant, he was already across the room again. "Good." Standing at the other end of it, Shadow couldn't help but feel like he'd just made a deal with the devil. "So that means our first order of business is..."

He glanced back at Shadow, who lingered near the center, unsure of what to do now. "Well, I'll worry about that tomorrow. For now, get some rest. You'll find bedrooms in the northern wing, take the first two rooms you see."

Shadow was about to protest - he still wasn't sure if he could trust this man, and going to sleep in his underground base seemed like a

distinctly bad idea - but he was surprised to find that, despite having spent the last fifty years in a medically induced coma, he wasn't just tired. He was *exhausted*.

He'd just clawed his way out of the bottom of the most protected facility in the United Federation. And all the chaos he'd used was taking its toll on him now. It was a wonder he was still on his feet as it was.

So he relented, turning to leave. Maria, propped up on the center console unwary of its switches and dials, slid down to follow him.

Before her feet could hit the floor, bright lights flooded the area as alarms screeched and wailed, instantly turning the peaceful room into a cacophony of colours. All the screens flickered and flashed in unison as if possessed.

"What did you do?!" Robotnik yelled, hopping to his feet and shielding his eyes from the intense shine.

"I didn't do anything," Shadow retorted, squinting. He was already half out the door.

Seeing that he was nowhere near any of the controls, Robotnik grumbled and hastily flicked a few switches. The room instantly returned to normal, but for the black screens flashing loading symbols as they all rebooted at once. "I *just* rewrote the OS, I thought these glitches would stop..."

Maria, crouched on the floor, stared wide-eyed at the buttons she'd been sitting on. She reached out and curled her fingers around a lever, slowly, like it might shatter. When she finally tugged down, it remained locked in place. Immovable, just as always. Not even a part of her reality.

Turning, she ran off after Shadow before the door could shut, putting those thoughts out of her mind.

Shadow sat up with a sigh, rubbing his forehead as he pushed himself off the cot he'd been laying sleepless on. His first night, or day, or whatever time it was, was not going well. It wasn't exactly easy to rest in this place.

The room he had chosen was as cold and identical a white as all the ones next to it, and the halls he'd passed to get here. Empty, bare of all but a simple bed and a chair and table. Solitary scientist didn't need to worry much about decorating, he supposed, and it's not like he minded the lack of luxury.

But the crushing, blank white and the overhead lights forever flickering on were burned into his mind even when he closed his eyes. And, to be honest, those were the least of his problems.

What was really keeping him up... That he wasn't entirely sure of.

Something was tugging at the edges of his mind, memories lingering threateningly on its horizon, the promise of nightmares should he dare to sleep again. And that had haunted him relentlessly though he'd kept his eyes tightly shut for hours.

Maria, sat cross-legged on a crate that had been haphazardly tossed into the corner, watched Shadow pace the tiny room. She didn't know what was on his mind, but the furrow of his brow and his restless wandering told her it was nothing pleasant.

She wished he could see her, she could talk to him, and they would figure this out together like they'd used to. Long ago. But Shadow went on walking by her like she wasn't even there. For him, she couldn't be. There was nothing she could do to help, and that was the worst part of all this.

Shadow stopped in his tracks, turning towards the shiny metal door. Pacing circles in this room was going to drive him insane, and it was reminding him of something he couldn't quite put his finger on, but definitely didn't like.

He needed out. Just for a minute.

The halls in this facility were unnaturally long and twisting, almost as if they had been designed to be confusing. Little adorned them but the occasional blue panel, their screens flickering with unknown buttons and commands.

He ran his fingers along the immaculate white walls as he walked, turning left, left, left at every crossroads he encountered. Not noticing the figure trailing just behind him like his own shadow.

On and on he wandered, his thoughts as aimless as the spiralling hallways.

Occasionally a small mechanical creature would whir by, its machinery clicking as it rolled hurriedly down the halls. Shadow and Maria had only a moment to marvel at the strange creations, splashed in red paint, before they were gone.

Beyond that, it was all quiet but for a distant machinery's hum. Shadow walked, turning, turning, and Maria stayed just in view, watching him disappear behind the curves. In a labyrinth like this, she was afraid to let him out of her sight. Like he might just fade away again should she take her eyes off him for a second. That was a fear that would probably never go away.

It seemed like an eternity before, finally, a tall white wall rose up before the wandering hedgehog. He stared up at it, as if the wall might shift and part to reveal a hidden path, but it remained solid and empty. Nowhere left to go but back.

Have you forgotten me already?

Shadow stiffened as the walls spoke to him, whispering echoed remains of a past he couldn't remember. A girl's voice, strangely familiar yet impossibly alien. Always gone as soon as she had arrived.

"Who's - ?!" Maria rounded the corner a few feet behind him just as he whipped around.

They both stopped. The look that struck his face reminded her of the one from a few hours ago, the one that had, just for a moment, stunned him long enough for her to catch up. The one that made her wonder.

"... There?"

Just another white wall, turning back down the path; not even a shadow of the person he'd seen standing at the end of the hall. Nothing was there. For Maria, as that brief, haunting moment of recognition flickered out of his eyes, there might as well have never been.

You can't hurt me.

He ran past her, leaving her staring at where he'd been standing as if he might return. As if they could go back.

Shadow collapsed on his bed, clutching his head before rolling violently over to block out the light. With all the strange things he'd seen, the even stranger revelations, those voices and that phantom chasing the edges of his vision wherever he went...

What was the difference between memory and reality? That question haunted him until, somehow, he slept.

Sweet, empty dreams, filling his head and his soul. Not quite the evanescent peace of dreamless sleep, but a nebulous void, vacant.

And yet, there was something there. The uncertainty of a promise unfulfilled, lingering, waiting. Something dark.

It scared him. He didn't know why. But that formless void wasn't just empty star-studded space; it was alive, and there was someone in

there waiting for him.

Shadow...

That voice, infinite, unending. Resounding forever through walls bleeding black. But wrong, somehow, not right, not her.

Not...

Shadow.

More insistent, firmer. She didn't talk like that, or she hadn't, at least, not back then. Even when her eyes were empty, leaking tears and blood, her voice never had that hollow ring behind it.

He didn't like that implication, like she was calling him back to something. Some directive from long ago, eclipsing everything he knew, everything he'd felt in that old dead world.

Don't you remember?

Calling, calling. The echoes of screams that no one heard, red pouring from dying stars and flooding the Earth. His heart torn from his chest and held up in front of him. Looking down, he saw a cavity engulfing his soul. A crater filled with infectious darkness. Spreading. Unstoppable.

She rose up before him, wrong, wrong, wrong. Soft baby blue had turned harsh scarlet, bright eyes dark and dull like grey stones. His heart melted in her hand as she stared, not moving, not breathing. Not real. Not right.

But the only thing he knew, the only one he could trust.

Standing over him, rising, when she lifted her hand again he saw something shiny and black peering down at him. An endless chasm that would take them all to where she'd gone, that place he couldn't ever follow.

She pressed it into his chest, her eyes like the singularity of a black hole, like the muzzle of a gun, leading nowhere. Consuming everything.

What are you waiting for...?

The gun was ice cold in his hands. It felt perfect, the thing he'd been searching for so long finally found. A directive. A purpose. A glimmer of truth in this world full of cruel lies.

She smiled. Behind a face dripping black ichor, her teeth were sharp and white.

Avenge me.

Note: This story is on hiatus for now as I work on The Channeler and later this year on Remnants of Time: Save (Legend of Spyro stories if you're interested; the former is kind of a standalone thing too so if you like dragons and fantasy maybe give it a look).

I've had a hard time keeping inspiration for this story, especially since it came during a bad time in my life. I'll work on some other stories and come back when it feels fresher. That could be years from now but I'm not intending on just dropping it.

If you're interested in my writing/art in general please follow me on Tumblr (under SnickerToodles), or just check on the Echoes of Eternity tag every once in a while so see any snippets I've written, art I've drawn, or updates on this story.